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## Father of Persian Verse

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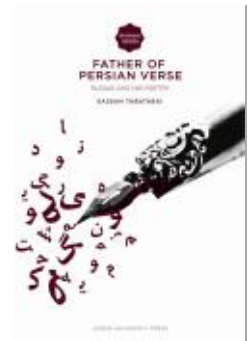
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## INTRODUCTION

### I: RUDAKI'S LIFE AND POETRY

In the tenth century CE, Nasr ibn Ahmad II (r. 914-943), the Sāmānid Amir who ruled north-eastern Persia from his capital in Bukhārā, had a habit of spending the spring and summer in Herat (present-day Afghanistan) away from the heat and dust of his capital. One year, he was so charmed by the temperate climate and the beautiful maidens of Herat that he failed to return to Bukhārā as expected. Many months passed and the Amir showed no sign of leaving Herāt. Knowing that the poet Rudaki was one of the Amir's intimates, the courtiers and army captains approached him and offered him five thousand *dinārs* if he could persuade the Amir to return to Bukhārā. At their request, Rudaki, who was considered an excellent musician as well as a poet, traveled to Herat. There, in the Amir's presence, Rudaki plucked his harp and recited this poem:

Juye-Muliyān's scent drifts my way,  
As do memories of a kind friend.  
The Āmuy is hard to cross, but its stones  
Feel silken soft beneath our feet.  
Thrilled to see a friend, the Jayhun's waves  
Leap halfway up our horses' flanks.  
O Bukhārā, be happy, live long:  
The cheerful Amir is returning to you.

The Amir is the moon, Bukhārā, the sky;  
 The moon is returning to the sky.  
 The Amir is a cypress, Bukhārā, the garden;  
 The cypress is returning to the garden.

According to the story, upon hearing the last line of the poem, the Amir became so homesick for Bukhārā that he mounted his horse without putting on his riding boots and started galloping towards Bukhārā. Out of gratitude, Rudaki received twice the amount promised to him.<sup>1</sup>

Abu ‘Abdollāh Ja‘far ibn Mohammad Rudaki is believed to have been born around 880 CE and died around 941 CE. Unfortunately, very little has been recorded about his life; much that is known must be pieced together from his own poetry. For many years, Rudaki enjoyed the patronage of the Sāmānid Amir, Nasr ibn Ahmad II and any discussion of Rudaki’s poetry must be contextualized within the framework of the court. Rudaki prospered at the Amir’s court and at the height of his glory was said to have possessed two hundred slaves and needed one hundred camels just to carry his luggage.<sup>2</sup>

However came honor and riches for some,  
 For him they came from the house of Sāmān:  
 Forty thousand from the Amir of Khorāsān,  
 Another five from the Amir of Mākān. (...)  
 When my words fell on the Amir’s ears,  
 He gave generously, as did the others’.

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<sup>1</sup> This anecdote appears in most of the historical sources on Rudaki. See A. J. Arberry, *Classical Persian Literature* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1958), pp. 32-33.

<sup>2</sup> Edward G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 456.

Apparently, Rudaki had made his way into the Sāmānid court before the reign of Nasr II. Proof of this can be found in a poem written by Rudaki for Nasr II's predecessor, Amir Ahmad ibn Ismā'il (r. 907-914). In the poem, Rudaki is trying to console Ahmad after the death of his father, Amir Ismā'il-ibn Ahmad, who died in 907.

You who are sad, who suffer,  
 Who hide your eyes that flow with tears  
 For him, whose name I don't mention  
 For fear of more sorrow and hardship:  
 Went what went and came what came,  
 Was what was, why grieve in vain?

Rudaki's position as the Sāmānid court poet can be considered the most significant aspect of his life. Traditionally, the court poet, whose function went far beyond that of a mere entertainer, was an integral part of the Persian court. Ardashir Bābakān, the founder of the Sāsānian dynasty in the third century, considered the poet a "part of government and the means of strengthening rulership."<sup>3</sup>

Other than praising the ruler and his realm, the poet was expected to be a source of counsel and moral guidance. As such, a poet like Rudaki would have to be well-versed in tradition. He would have to be familiar with the body of didactic literature of the past and draw upon it when necessary.

Take action. Don't sit idle for too long,  
 Even though your sacks of gold reach the moon.

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<sup>3</sup> Julie Scott Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 6. Meisami provides a detailed account of the relationship between poet and court from its pre-Islamic origins.

The relationship between poet and patron was one of mutual benefit. The poet would glorify his patron, preserving his name and reputation. In return, the poet would gain wealth and influence, enjoying the luxuries of courtly life. Nizāmi Aruzi describes the poet-patron relationship in *Chahār Maqāleh* (1155-1157), a discussion in four discourses of the four influential professions of medieval Persia: the civil service, poetry, astrology and medicine. “A king cannot dispense with a good poet, who shall conduce to the immortality of his name, and shall record his fame in *diwāns* and books,” writes Aruzi. “For when the king receives that command which none can escape (death), no trace will remain of his army, his treasure, and his store; but his name will endure forever by reason of the poet’s verse.”<sup>4</sup>

Praise the Amir. May the whole world praise him.  
Beauty, virtue and order spring from him.

As the center of court life, the Amir enjoyed total devotion from the poet who would praise his strength and valor.

On the day of battle, of hate, of bravery,  
If you see him clad in helmet and armor,  
He will make an elephant seem small,  
Even a drunk, roaring elephant.

We can see the influence of the court’s culture and sensibilities even in Rudaki’s love poems. The lover’s unconditional devotion to his beloved parallels the loyal service expected of the poet or courtier.

If I’m not unlucky, how did I get involved

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<sup>4</sup> As quoted in Meisami, p. 10.

With this quick-to-anger woman of easy virtue?  
She likes it if I'm thrown to the lions.  
I can't stand it if a fly sits on her.  
She tortures me. But my love for her  
And loyalty to her never leave my heart.

In another poem he writes:

If only you'd place one foot upon this ground,  
I'd make a thousand prostrations to its dust.

Many of the images in Rudaki's love poems have become staples of Persian poetry: the moon as the beautiful face of the beloved, the narcissi as eyes with which to see the beloved, the tulip as the cheeks of the beloved, and the agate as a tear of blood shed because of heartache.

You've stolen color and scent from the rose:  
Color for your cheeks, scent for your hair.  
The stream turns rose-colored when you wash your face.  
The street smells of musk when you let down your hair.

The relationship between poet and patron, however, was a precarious one. When addressing the patron, whether praising or giving advice, the poet had to be careful not to offend. Offending the ruler could be costly to the poet who could easily lose his livelihood and quite possibly his life. The poet's position at court was also influenced by the internal politics and power struggles within the court. Rudaki's fortune was to a large extent dependent on the support of his main benefactor, Abolfazl Mohammad ibn Abdollāh Bal'ami, the vizier to Amir Nasr ibn Ahmad II. Bal'ami, who was one of the central figures in the Sāmānid court, has been credited, to a large extent, with the blossoming of Persian literature

in the tenth century. As the Amir's vizier from 922 to 938, he drew literary talent to the Sāmānid court by commissioning works of literature and offering lavish rewards to poets.

Bal'ami considered Rudaki to be unrivaled among both Persian and Arab poets. He commissioned Rudaki to translate the *Kalila va Dimna*, the collection of Indian "Bidpai" fables into Persian from an Arabic translation of the Pahlavi translation of the Sanskrit original. Unfortunately, no more than a few couplets have survived from Rudaki's translation.<sup>5</sup>

Rudaki's fortune took a turn for the worse with the death of Bal'ami in 937. Soon after, Rudaki fell out of favor with the Amir and was expelled from court. This traumatic event in Rudaki's life was followed by the death of the poet Shahid Balkhi, a close friend of Rudaki who had also enjoyed the patronage of the Sāmānid court. In a moving elegy on the death of Balkhi, one can sense Rudaki's anguish at his own situation:

Shahid's caravan has left before ours.  
Believe me, ours will also leave.  
Count the eyes, there is one pair less,  
Measure the wisdom, thousands less.  
Reap all that enriches your soul  
Before death comes to bind your legs.

With his connection to the court severed, Rudaki spent the rest of his life in poverty and died a blind and desolate man in 941. In the poems written towards the end of his life, he complains about his miserable condition and his sad predicament.

My teeth are all worn down and falling out.

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the role of Bal'ami as Rudaki's patron, see Zabihollāh Safā, *Tārikh-e Adabiyāt dar Iran* vol. 1 (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1977), pp. 376-381.

They weren't just teeth, they were as bright light.

He reminisces about his youth, health, strength and vitality, and mourns their loss:

My dark-haired beauty, you can't possibly know,  
What shape I was in a long time ago!  
You can caress your lover with your curls,  
But never saw him with curls of his own.

Finally, he resigns himself to his pitiable state:

But times have changed, so have I. Bring me my staff.  
It's time for the cane and the beggar's purse.

In one sad example, he seems to long for the days of comfort and luxury at court and helplessly asks for an explanation for his sudden change of fortune:

I was always intoxicated in this house.  
Like the Amir and nobles, my place was secure.  
Now, I am the same, the house and town are the same.  
Then tell me, how has happiness turned to sorrow?

Rudaki was thought to have been blind from birth, but most scholars agree that he was not born blind but lost his sight later in life. The physical descriptions of shapes and colors in Rudaki's poetry make it highly unlikely that he was blind from birth. The imagery and the vivid depiction of nature in his poetry suggest that it is the work of someone who had a visual experience of the world. In one poem he compares a curl of his beloved's hair to a letter of the alphabet, and the mole on her cheek to the dot of that letter.



Who curled your hair into a “j”?  
 He who made your mole the dot of the “j”.  
 And your mouth is so small, as if someone  
 Has split a pomegranate seedlet in half.

In another poem, he not only describes a particular bird, he actually uses the verb “to see.”

I saw a hoopoe near Sarakhs  
 Whose little song reached the clouds.  
 She was wearing a little cloak  
 Of many different colors.

Rudaki borrows most of his imagery from the physical world. He treats nature as if it is a person and superimposes human characteristics on it, which often results in dynamic portraits:

The mighty heavens have fielded an army:  
 An army of dark clouds led by the zephyr,  
 Lightning its artillery, thunder its drummer.  
 I have seen a thousand armies, never so fierce.

A cloud that rains becomes a broken-hearted man, and the sun hidden behind clouds becomes a prisoner avoiding the guard:

Look at that cloud, how it cries like a grieving man,  
 Thunder moans like a lover with a broken heart.  
 Now and then the sun peeks from behind the clouds  
 Like a prisoner hiding from the guard.

Even wine is alive with human characteristics. Rudaki describes the “emotions” of the crushed grape inside a cask:

But when aware of what has happened,  
 It will froth. It will moan from heartache,  
 Sink to the bottom with sadness,  
 Boil to the surface with sorrow.

Rudaki's poetry also resonates with references to a pre-Islamic orientation towards life. By the tenth century, although Islam had become deeply entrenched, the Persians still identified with a deep-rooted Zoroastrian past. One dominant theme in pre-Islamic Persian literature is *andarz*, moralizing and ethical teachings, admonitions and advice for proper behavior in both the private and public spheres of life. In *andarz* texts, a central concept is that of moderation, and man is urged to assume his proper place in cultured society by acquiring good manners and good speech.<sup>6</sup>

People aren't required to be generous and kind,  
 But they are required to be thankful for grace.  
 My lord bestows much that isn't required of him.  
 How can I neglect what is required of me?

One must work hard and avoid laziness, falsehood and injustice; and must act virtuously by being honest, generous and kind. Rudaki invokes this pre-Islamic Zoroastrian ethos when describing the qualities of his patron.

With hand and tongue he spreads gold and pearls.  
 Not in vain, has his name spread through the world.  
 He planted the branch of kindness in our hearts.  
 It's no joke that he has turned his back on wealth.

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<sup>6</sup> For a concise discussion of *andarz*, see Z. Safā, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under *Andarz*. ii. *Andarz* literature in new Persian.

Much of Rudaki's poetry is devoted to moral exhortation and is loaded with references to Zoroastrian culture and ancient Iranian themes, rather than Islamic and Semitic ones.

It's a puzzle, describing his grace and will:  
 He is the *Avestā* in wisdom, the *Zand* in essence. (...)  
 His essence is the *Vahi-nāmeḥ* to Kasrā.  
 His ways have filled the *Pand-nāmeḥ* with guidance.  
 The essence of this king is the real *Pand-nāmeḥ*,  
 So that fortune itself can take counsel from him.<sup>7</sup>

The absence of Islamic references in Rudaki's work and his preoccupation with pre-Islamic Iranian themes provide an important clue regarding his orientation toward Persian culture. In fact, there are several instances in Rudaki's poetry where he all but dismisses the conventions of religious practices and Islamic life. Usually, such references are shrouded, as in a poem where he puts love before religion.

What use is facing the House of God, when the heart  
 Faces Bukhārā and the beauties of Tarāz?  
 God will accept your devotion to love,  
 But he will not accept your prayers.

In other poems, he talks openly about drinking wine and getting drunk, disregarding Islam's insistence on abstention. It must be noted that unlike later Persian poetry where wine and drunkenness take on mystical connotations and can be interpreted as

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<sup>7</sup> Here, Rudaki is evoking Zoroastrian virtues as laid out in pre-Islamic sacred texts. The *Avestā* is the sacred writings of Zoroastrianism and the *Zand* is the interpretation of the *Avestā*. The *Vahi-nāmeḥ* (Letter of Revelation) and the *Pand-nāmeḥ* (Letter of Guidance) are pre-Islamic moral injunctions.

divine intoxication, for Rudaki, wine meant nothing more than wine, and drunkenness meant nothing more than being drunk.

Now we are drunk, so let's drink wine.  
 Let's drink from the hands of beauties.  
 They call us crazy and senseless.  
 We are not crazy. We are drunk.

Perhaps one of the most telling examples of Rudaki's disregard for Islamic conventions is the poem in which he consoles the Amir for the death of his father. Interestingly, there is no mention of religion in this poem. Rudaki's remedy for the Amir's grief is to drink wine.

To break the siege of sorrow on your heart  
 It is better to fetch the wine and drink.  
 Out of great disasters, there will appear  
 Virtue and grace and nobility.

Note that in the last couplet, Rudaki returns to some of the pre-Islamic *andarz* themes and emphasizes what he considers to be the hallmarks of Persian identity, namely virtue and honor.

Rudaki was also an innovator of poetic form. Aside from writing in forms inherited from Arabic poetry, namely the *qasida* and the *qit'a*, he is thought to be the first poet to have written in the *rubā'i* (pl. *rubā'iyāt*) form. The *rubā'i* is a quatrain (two couplets), which usually contains a succinct meditation on love. There is a historical anecdote associated with Rudaki's "discovery" of the *rubā'i*. As the story goes, while Rudaki was taking a stroll through the streets of Bukhārā, he came across a group of children at play. They were rolling walnuts on the ground and singing a childhood

jingle. The jingle caught Rudaki's ear who later wrote a poem in the same meter. The rest, as they say, is history.<sup>8</sup>

When you find me dead, my lips apart,  
 A shell empty of life, worn out by want,  
 Sit by my bedside and say, with charm:  
 "It is I who killed you, I regret it now."

By most accounts, Rudaki was a prolific poet. He has been said to have composed 1,300,000 couplets.<sup>9</sup> Even if we take this number to be a gross exaggeration, his poetic output was undoubtedly much more than has survived to this day. The loss of much of Rudaki's poetry, who holds such a prominent position in the history of Persian literature, is puzzling. Jan Rypka attributes the loss of Rudaki's work to the nature of the poetry itself. "His verse is adorned by a simplicity which the completely antithetical taste of the periods of mannerism that followed were incapable of comprehending," proposes Rypka. "Since Rudaki had nothing to offer to satisfy the increasing demands of a literary taste intent on artificiality, the *divān* [collected poems] was lost."<sup>10</sup>

The poems that have survived have been preserved in the works of others, like Mohammad 'Aufi's thirteenth century anthology of poetry, *Lobāb al-Albāb* (Quintessence of Hearts), which is one of the earliest sources in which we find Rudaki's poetry; Nizāmi Aruzi's twelfth century *Chahār Maqāla* (Four

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<sup>8</sup> Ja'far Sho'ār and Hasan Anvari, *Gozideh-ye ash'ar-e Rudaki* (Tehran: Nashr-e 'Elm, 1994), p. 171. For a discussion on the origins of the ruba'i see Shafi'i-Kadkani, *Musiqi-e she'r* (Tehran: Enteshārāt-e Āgāh, 1989), pp. 467-478. Also see Elwell-Sutton, "The 'rubā'i' in early Persian literature," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 4, ed. R. N. Frye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 633-658.

<sup>9</sup> Arberry, pp. 33-34.

<sup>10</sup> Jan Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1968), pp. 144-145.

Discourses); and Asadi's eleventh century Persian dictionary *Loghāt-e Fors* (Persian Words).<sup>11</sup>

## II. ON TRANSLATING THE POETRY OF RUDAKI

I faced several obstacles while translating Rudaki's poetry into English. My first priority in translating Rudaki has been to convey the meaning of his poems. Even when certain liberties had to be taken in order to bring my English lines to life, they have never been at the expense of the overall meaning of the poem. A translation that in any way alters the sense of the original poem ceases to be a translation altogether and becomes nothing more than an imitation.

Regarding its form, the most important outward features of Persian poetry are its quantitative prosody (measurement of syllables according to length) and its rhyme. The translator who tries to carry the forms of the Persian poem over into English is faced with monumental difficulties. The basic structure of English poetry is accentual, relying on stress rather than the length of syllables. When translating a classical Persian poem into English, if the translator insists on presenting the Persian poem to the English reader within the framework of Persian metrics, the result can be a clumsy poem sounding forced and unnatural.

Trying to bring the rhyme scheme from Persian over into English presents a similar problem. Persian poetry allows a liberal manipulation of language in order to satisfy its poetical forms. It is not unusual to find lengthy poems that use the same rhyme throughout. For example, we find in Rudaki's work a poem like "The mother of wine," in which each of the poem's 94 couplets end

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<sup>11</sup> Arberry, p. 101.

in the same rhyme. In the poem "What my soul was like," 34 couplets not only end in the same rhyme but in the same word.

My decision to translate Rudaki's poems into couplets stems from the outward form of classical Persian poetry. The unit of the Persian poem is a *bayt* or distich, which is divided into two *misrā'* or semi-distichs. The two semi-distichs are of equal weight (they have the same number of feet). They are mirror images of each other and the same thought usually runs through both. I find this balance and symmetry to be an important aspect of Persian poetry, which I have tried to reflect in my translations. I have presented each distich as a couplet in which I have tried to maintain symmetry in both lines.

You can caress your lover with your curls,  
 But never saw him with curls of his own.  
 The days are past when his skin was silken-soft.  
 The days are past when his hair was raven-dark.  
 Beauty and charm were once his darling guests,  
 Guests who will not come back, nonetheless.

Another consideration of form can be seen in the language I have used for my translations. The language in Rudaki's poems is relatively simple, free of the ornamentation we find in later Persian poetry. To a large extent, the beauty of Rudaki's poetry lies in its simplicity. I have, therefore, tried to avoid using inflated English, which would alter the stylistic substance of the original.

Day raises its banner in your name.  
 The crescent moon is like your cup.  
 Destiny imitates your strong will.  
 Your charity is daily bread for all.

The translator of Persian poetry is faced with a variety of choices he will inevitably have to make in the English renderings. In particular, the nuances of a language such as punctuation, pronouns, articles, prepositions and gender, that are often absent from the Persian, must be inserted into the English translation if it is to make any sense.

The problem of punctuation can be relatively straightforward. In the original Persian, punctuation is inferred by the context, making a close and accurate reading essential. Translating pronouns, however, can be a delicate business, which often requires an active choice on the part of the translator. Persian pronouns lack gender, something that often needs to be added to the English translation. Once again, the translator must make a decision based on the context in order to attribute gender to the English pronouns. Granted, in many cases, the gender is quite evident; “Turks with pomegranate breasts,” are undoubtedly female.

But designating gender to pronouns is not always as obvious. In classical Persian poetry, it is not uncommon for young boys to be the objects of amorous discourse. Furthermore, at times it is unclear whether the poet is talking about himself or his beloved. In the following couplet by Rudaki, the pronoun in the first line is pivotal to the meaning:

Beauty and charm were once his darling guests,  
Guests who will not come back, nevertheless.

The problem is exacerbated when Rudaki refers to himself in the first person in one couplet and in the third person in the next couplet:

My dark-haired beauty, you can't possibly know,  
What shape I was in a long time ago!  
You can caress your lover with your curls,



But never saw him with curls of his own.

Articles and prepositions present a different kind of difficulty for the translator of Persian poetry. Here, the problem isn't the translatability of [missing] articles and prepositions but their effect on the English line. Inserting articles and prepositions into the English translation inflates the line, destroying the distilled character and conciseness of the original. I have made a consistent effort to avoid, as much as possible, inflating my lines with articles and prepositions. Rolfe Humphries faced a similar problem when translating from the Latin. "Latin does not have to use all those miserable little space-taking pronouns, articles, prepositions — he, she, it, the, an, a, of, to," complains Humphries, "words that, before you know it, creep in, like the termites they are, to eat away the whole fabric of the line."<sup>12</sup>

One dilemma facing the translator is whether or not to clarify something in the translation that is vague in the original. Should you impose clarity on the translation for the sake of the reader or should you leave it vague, the way you found it? I have tried to present Rudaki's poems with as little embellishment, explanation or elaboration as possible. For the most part, wherever there has been imagery that would make sense to the Persian reader but perhaps not to an English reader, I have allowed the poem to stand on its own without artificial support. The imagery usually becomes apparent through the context of the poem.

How can I sew my gaze shut? To see my love  
Only narcissi grow on my grave, not weeds.

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<sup>12</sup> Rolfe Humphries, "Latin and English verse — some practical considerations," in *On Translation*, ed. R. A. Brower (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 61.

In Persian poetry, narcissi represent eyes with which to see the beloved. I think the imagery comes across without the need for any elaboration on my part. Wherever the need has arisen for some kind of elaboration for the imagery to make sense, I have tried to keep my additions to a minimum.

I want to stroke your amber-scented hair,  
Paint with kisses the jasmine petals of your face.

The “face” at the end of the couplet is my addition. The Persian reader has no problem identifying “jasmine petals” as the soft, pale cheeks of the beloved, but the English reader, faced with the line: “Paint with kisses your jasmine petals,” might have difficulty deciphering the imagery from the context of the poem.

In other cases, the original is vague in the sense that it lends itself to different interpretations. In such poems, I have tried to stick to the original as much as possible, maintaining the ambiguity of the original to allow for the possibility of different readings. Consider the following couplet:

Stop, like a period. Because the lord  
Has struck your name from the book of speech.

This couplet is open to two interpretations centered around “the lord” and “the book of speech.” The word “Lord,” (capitalized) would imply God. The “lord” (not capitalized) can be understood as “god” or as “ruler.” Hence, if “lord” is read as “god,” the line is understood as: “god has removed you from the world.” If, on the other hand, “lord” is read as “ruler,” the line is understood as: “the Amir has erased your name from the court *divān* (thrown you out of court).”

In another poem, Rudaki writes:

My eyes are a sea. The fire in my heart roars.  
 How can the pupil survive between sea and fire?

Here, once again, I have tried to maintain the ambiguity of the original, which makes the couplet open to different interpretations. The second line should be vague enough so that “the pupil” can be interpreted as a person (the poet himself), or the pupil of the eye.

When translating a work that is culturally and chronologically removed from our own, every twist and turn in the translator’s road reveals new and unexpected obstacles. Should we attempt to translate every feature peculiar to the space and time of the work that is being translated? In tenth-century Bukhārā, the prevalent monetary unit was the *dirham*. Should *dirhams* be translated as dollars or cents (or pounds or shillings) for the English reader? William Arrowsmith faced a similar conundrum while translating from the ancient Greek. “How do we translate a currency made of talents, minas, drachmas and obols?” he wondered.<sup>13</sup>

In order to maintain the exotic feel of a poem written over a thousand years ago in a foreign land with a different culture, some aspects of the original poem need to be transferred into the English, not translated. To translate *dirhems* into dollars, for example, would take away from the alien and alluring qualities of the poem. The key is to transfer the poem, along with its social, cultural and historical context, into English. Tenth-century Bukhārā, must never become twentieth-century New York, just to make things more familiar for the reader. To translate such cultural and historical nuances as the currency, is to translate too much. This would only hinder the translation by distancing the original poem from its context. Hence, *dirhams* are left as *dirhams*.

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<sup>13</sup> Arrowsmith, “The lively conventions,” in *Craft and Context of Translation*, ed. W. Arrowsmith and R. Shattuck (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1971), pp. 122-123.

When he found Turks with pomegranate breasts,  
He appraised and counted out the dirhams.

The exotic nature of this poem stems from the fact that it is set in medieval Bukhārā, a place where slaves and concubines are part of the social tapestry. Rudaki is choosing a slave girl for his evening pleasure in tenth century Bukhārā. He is not soliciting a prostitute in Times Square in 2008. Arrowsmith also tries to avoid such over-translating. “[Italian] *Lire* may be more familiar to modern ears,” he writes, “but a little shaping and emphasis by the translator, even an intruded gloss where required, will make of drachmas and obols a perfectly acceptable convention.”<sup>14</sup>

A similar problem is posed by proper names, which Humphries considers to be stumbling blocks for the translator. “Should we bring over the name of every single ... river and mountain?” he asks. The question is a valid one, especially when many geographical names have an equivalent modern name which the reader can immediately identify. “Some names, whether of place or person,” contends Humphries, “mean nothing to us in illusion or connotation, and one of our obligations to the original author is not to bore his audience.”<sup>15</sup>

The poem “Juye-Muliyān,” offers an interesting case. In consecutive couplets, Rudaki mentions the Āmuy and the Jayhun, rivers that the Amir must cross on his way to Bukhārā. In fact, the Āmuy (or Āmu Daryā) and the Jayhun are the Persian and Arabic names, respectively, of the same river in Central Asia: the Oxus. My initial impulse was to substitute the Oxus for the other names. After all, the Oxus is more readily identifiable by the western reader, whereas the mention of the Āmuy or the Jayhun would send one scrambling for an atlas of Central Asia.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.

<sup>15</sup> Humphries, “Latin and English verse,” in *On Translation*, p. 63.

The dilemma arises, not in the actual choice of the river's name, but the fact that Rudaki uses two different names for the same river. Since this is one of Rudaki's best known and most often-translated poems, we have several examples to consider. Arberry chooses to use Oxus in both couplets:

The sands of Oxus, toilsome though they be,  
 Beneath my feet were soft as silk to me.  
 Glad at the friend's return, the Oxus deep  
 Up to our girths in laughing waves shall leap.<sup>16</sup>

Jackson opts for a different method. He changes *Āmuy* to Oxus but leaves the *Jayhun* as is:

The sandy road by Oxus' banks, that rugged way,  
 Silk-soft beneath my feet to me appears to-day:  
 And *Jihun's* waves, for very joy at their friend's face,  
 Rise to our waists in blithesome mood with fond embrace.<sup>17</sup>

Rudaki himself decided to use two different names, Arabic and Persian, for the same river. Since the two words, "*Āmuy*" and "*Jayhun*," are metrically identical, we know Rudaki did not use different names in different lines merely to satisfy the meter. Some thousand odd years later, we can only speculate as to why he chose two different names for the same river. Hence, in my translation, I have decided to maintain the two different names as they appear in the original.

The *Āmuy* is hard to cross, but its stones  
 Feel silken soft beneath our feet.

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<sup>16</sup> Arberry, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> A. V. Williams Jackson, *Early Persian Poetry: From the Beginnings Down to the Times of Firdausi* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920) p. 36.

Thrilled to see a friend, the Jayhun's waves  
Leap halfway up our horses' flanks.

I feel that a quick reference to the notes by the reader is not too much trouble for the worth of maintaining the names chosen by Rudaki himself.

Translating Persian months into English is yet another troublesome feature. The Persian calendar is seasonal, based on the natural cycles of nature. The Persian New Year takes place on the first of *Farvardin*, the first day of the first month of the Persian calendar. The first of *Farvardin* falls on the first day of spring, the vernal equinox, which roughly corresponds to the 20th or 21st of March. The first of *Tir* is the first day of summer; the first of *Mehr* is the first day of autumn; and the first day of *Day* is the first day of winter. To look at it another way, each month of the Persian calendar corresponds exactly to a sign of the zodiac.

The Persian months and their approximate equivalent dates in English are as follows:

Farvardin:	March 21 — April 20
Ordibehesht:	April 21 — May 21
Khordād:	May 22 — June 21
Tir:	June 22 — July 23
Mordād:	July 24 — August 23
Shahrivar:	August 24 — September 23
Mehr:	September 24 — October 23
Ābān:	October 24 — November 22
Āzar:	November 23 — December 22
Day:	December 23 — January 20
Bahman:	January 21 — February 19
Esfand:	February 20 — March 20

Each Persian month can be presented to the English reader in three different ways. One option is simply to approximate the English equivalent of its Persian month. For example, *Farvardin*, the first month of spring, can be approximated as April since almost two-thirds of *Farvardin* falls in April. *Āzar*, the last month of autumn, can be translated as November since most of the last month of autumn falls in November.

This option poses several problems. Rudaki, as a poet of nature, was fond of using the imagery of the natural world. Much of his poetry resonates with his concern for the natural cycle of things: life, death, aging, the seasons. Very often, he uses months in order to place his poems within the proper cyclical framework of nature. When he mentions *Āzar*, the last month of autumn, not only is he mentioning the end of autumn, but he is hinting at the start of winter. The problem with translating a month like *Āzar*, which runs approximately from November 23rd to December 22nd, is that neither November nor December can adequately convey *Āzar*. November is at least twenty days away from the end of autumn and December, already loaded with winter's baggage, conjures a completely different feeling.

A second option is to translate the Persian months according to their corresponding seasons. The obvious problem here is that three months correspond to each season; for example, *Mehr*, *Ābān* and *Āzar*, can all be translated as "autumn." When a specific month is translated as an entire season, the translation is diluted, presenting something as general where the original is specific. The seasonal approach to translating the names of months would need an additional qualifier (a part of the season: beginning, middle or end) if it is to represent a specific month. *Āzar*, for example, represents "late autumn."

A third option is simply to use the Persian names of the months in the English translation. For the reader who does not know what the Persian name of each month signifies, each time the name

of a Persian month is used it must be accompanied by a note of explanation.

As with all other self-imposed guidelines in translating, it quickly becomes evident that it is impossible to stick to one particular method, because much of translation is dictated by the context of the original. In translating Persian months into English, I have used all three options outlined above, depending on the context in which the Persian months were used.

In “The mother of wine,” referring to grapes ripening on the vine, Rudaki writes that a baby (grape) must drink the mother’s milk (ripen on the vine) for seven months, from the beginning of *Ordibehesht* until the end of *Ābān*. *Ordibehesht* and *Ābān* are the second and eighth months, respectively, of the Persian calendar. His use of *Ordibehesht* and *Ābān* are primarily to indicate a span of time, the seven non-winter months it takes for the grapes to ripen. Therefore, I didn’t find it necessary to make direct references to the specific months.

But it isn’t fair to separate  
A baby from its mother’s breast,  
Before it has suckled for seven months,  
From early spring until late fall.

Similarly, in “Winter’s breath,” I have translated “*Day*” as “winter” because the main function of “*Day*” in the poem is to conjure a cold winter wind that is blowing on the field:

This grass field, tinged by winter’s breath  
Like the tails of tigers and wolves,

However, in “Mehregān,” a poem about the Persian celebration of autumn, I have kept “*Āzar*,” the last month of autumn, as it appears in the Persian original. In this poem, *Āzar* is



used for a more specific purpose than the examples noted above. It conveys the end of autumn and the beginning of winter. In a poem about Mehregān, which was originally a Zoroastrian celebration, specific months and their places within the seasons assume a more distinguishing role. Replacing *Āzar* with autumn would, in my opinion, dilute the line.



