The Great 'Umar Khayyam

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Other Persian Quatrains in Holland:  
the Roseraie du Savoir of Ḫusayn-i Āzād

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In 1932 the Dutch poet and classical scholar Pieter C. Boutens published a collection of one-hundred Dutch quatrains under the title Honderd Hollandsche kwatrijnen. These poems are not translations, but entirely original poems, without any trace of romantic Orientalism; no names of ancient Persian kings, no wine, no roses and nightingales. Apart from the prosodical features only a few items remind us of Persian literature: for instance, the crown and the beggar’s bowl, or the king’s robe of honour and the rags worn by a dervish – who would not think of the contrast between king and beggar in so many Persian texts? The image in the final lines of Boutens’ concluding quatrains is also unmistakably Persian:

Nothing but empty bridges of twilight  
Between the moth and his starry candle.

The “Hollandsche kwatrijnen” are characteristic of Boutens’ own poetics, marked by an ideosyncratic Platonic symbolism. In an intimate monologue he speaks to a transcendental person about his desire to escape from this limited existence and to unite with eternal beauty, which he can only reach after death.¹

Reading these remarkable Dutch quatrains, I could not escape the impression that there are more “Persian” elements than appear at first sight. But this impression could only be tested by a thorough analysis of the text, which has still to be carried out. In this paper I cannot go further than to explore the context in which the poems were written.

Many Dutch poets of the 20th century wrote original poems in the form that came to be known as the ‘Oosterse kwatrijn’ (the Eastern quatrain); sometimes very serious poems, sometimes no more than light verse. If there is anything Persian about them, this can be retraced to ʿUmar Khayyām and in particular Edward FitzGerald.²

To Boutens the choice of this Persian form for his own poetry was the outcome of a long process of interiorisation of Persian poetry, which began about 1913 when he published his versions of Khayyām’s quatrains. Only a few years before the Hollandsche kwatrijnen, Boutens had published
another volume of *Oudperzische kwatrijnen* (Ancient Persian quatrains). This was based on a collection of Persian mystical quatrains, appearing in 1906 in two parts: one, published in Paris, was entitled *La Roseraie du Savoir. Choix de quatrains mystiques tirés des meilleurs auteurs persans*, and contained French prose translations of mystical quatrains; the other part, with the Persian texts, was printed by E.J. Brill in Leiden.

The French part of this anthology became a fairly popular book in the Netherlands. It profited from the popularity of 'Umar Khayyām in the Netherlands during the first decades of the 20th century. Yet few translations were made, apart from Boutens’ *Oudperzische kwatrijnen*. Johan Hendrik Leopold made a smaller selection, of thirty-two of the quatrains. It is remarkable that the *Roseraie* did not have a similar success in other Western countries, either with the general public, or with the orientalists. The only translations into a European language known to me are by the Czech Orientalist Věra Kubíčková.

No Dutch poet of the last century, not even Leopold, was as fascinated by Persian quatrains as Boutens. What impressed him was not Khayyām, and certainly not Edward FitzGerald’s version, of which he did not hold a very high opinion. Rather, it was the *Roseraie*, which opened to him a much wider range of the Persian poetical tradition than the rather limited themes of the Khayyāmian corpus.

The Persian author of this anthology is not named in Western histories of Persian literature. Even Edward Browne never mentions him. Also in Persia, few people still know who he was. His biography can only be retraced from the scant information he gave about himself in the introductions to his published anthologies and from a limited number of other sources.

### The Life of Ḫusayn-i Āzād

The full name of the anthologist was Mirzā Ḫusayn Khān of Tabriz. However, on the titlepages of his books he called himself “Hoceyne-Azad,” or Ḫusayn-i Āzād in the transcription used in this article. Āzād (“the free one”) was evidently a takhallus, or pen name, but no poems of his, in which he might have used it, are known to me. Perhaps he only adopted it when he began to publish his anthologies in exile, and as we will see, it is very likely that this choice had an autobiographical significance.

Ḫusayn must have been born in Tabriz around 1850. His grandfather was a merchant in the capital of Azerbaijan, which in the 19th century was the most progressive city of Qajar Iran. Several leaders of the reform movement before and during the Constitutional Revolution were Azarbaijanis. Ḫusayn’s father, Mīrzā Yūsuf Khān, who later received the honorific name Mustashār al-Dowla, “Counsellor of the State,” was a
diplomat who was stationed in Russia, Georgia and France. He became a supporter of the reformer Malkum Khan, who had a great political influence in Iran until he fell out with the Qajar ruler Nasir al-Din Shah. From London, where he had been the Shah’s ambassador, Malkum Khan promoted his political ideas in many publications, including a periodical entitled Qanun, “the Law.” This title summarizes the essence of his program: the establishment of a constitutional government in Persia under the rule of law. Following in his footsteps, Mustashar al-Dowla wrote a pamphlet entitled Yak kalima, “One Word,” by which Malkum’s keyword qanun was intended. He advocated the introduction of a secular code of laws, modelled on the French legal system, that would be valid for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The Islamic Shari’a would be relevant only for strictly religious matters.  

During the following decades, Mustashar al-Dowla played a role in Iranian politics as a minister in the reformist cabinet of Husayn Khan Sipahsalar, but little progress was made in the implementation of his ideas about the change of autocratic rule. In 1891 he came into conflict with the Shah. He was put in jail and brutally tortured. Four years later he died from the injuries.

The tragic ending of his father’s life must have made a deep impression on his son Husayn. However, this did not induce him to take part in the revolutionary upheaval in Persia. Throughout the years of the constitutional revolution he led the life of a private scholar living far from his country, and there are no signs that he took any interest in the events to which his father had been such an important intellectual forerunner.

Husayn was educated in Europe where his family travelled from one country to another. This enabled him to acquire a good knowledge of more than one Western language, including Latin. He also became well-read in Persian literature. In the late 1860s, he began his medical studies in Paris, continuing them in England during the Franco-German war of 1870-71. After the war he took his doctorat en médecine in Paris and then returned to Persia. At that moment his father was at the peak of his political career, which must have helped him to gain access to the Qajar court. He joined the team of medical advisors, including the French doctor Tholozan, who guarded the health of Nasir al-Din Shah. Here he caught the attention of the eldest son of the Shah, prince Mas’ud, who hired him as his personal physician.

Prince Mas’ud, who is better known by his honorific Zill al-Sultan, “Shadow of Royal Power” was, even more than his father, the personification of Qajar autocratic rule. As the Shah’s governor he controlled the central and southern provinces of Persia from his residence in Isfahan. He arrogated great powers to himself, even recruiting his own army which was dressed in Prussian uniforms. The memory of his ruthless and, at times, cruel behaviour has lived on in Persia to the present day. It is reflected in
the short novel *Prince Ihtijāb* (1969) by Hūshang Gulshīrī, one of the most remarkable works in recent Persian literature.\(^5\) On the other hand, the Zīl al-Suṭṭān liked to pose as an enlightened ruler who was open to modern inventions, and he maintained good relations with the British, then the most influential foreign power in southern Persia. Many Europeans came to Isfahan to visit the formidable governor. Among them was Wilfrid Sparroy, an English tutor to whom Zīl al-Suṭṭān entrusted the education of his children. He wrote a book about his experiences at the court of Isfahan, in which an entire chapter is devoted to the “Persian virtuoso” whom he met there in 1898.\(^6\) This was the Zīl al-Suṭṭān’s physician, Dr. Ḥusayn Mīrzā. Sparroy describes him as a very erudite man with a modern frame of mind. He distinguished himself from the rest of the courtiers by not trying to enrich himself, although he could not stay entirely aloof from the petty rivalries in this environment. Sparroy makes mention of the antagonism between the doctor and another courtier by the name of Āghā Bāshī:

“...two men, who were not only opponents contending for the upper hand in the Court circle, but also rivals in the pursuit of a hobby, the collecting of old Persian manuscripts. That the doctor, who is probably the most learned man in his country, and able to hold his own in any circle in England and France, his knowledge of the languages spoken there being absolutely faultless, could be jealous of an effete individual who can neither read nor write, did not enter into my calculations...”\(^7\)

This kind of life had made Ḥusayn a very suspicious man, who seemed to be deeply unhappy. His intellectual refuge was the study of Persian art and literature. He told the English teacher that his ambition was to make a huge illustrated volume on the illumination of Persian manuscripts:

*I am on the way of being the authority on the Persian illuminated art work. My collection is fairly representative, and is the result of many years of patient toil. I had it in mind at one time to write a book on the subject, that should be published in France.*

For the purpose of copying ancient manuscripts he employed a calligrapher “who can challenge comparison with our Old Masters in the art of writing and illuminating the works of Persian poets.”\(^8\)

Sparroy was sceptical about the chances that this monumental book would ever be written, and indeed it never was. In 1899, one year after his meeting with Sparroy, Ḥusayn left for Europe on the pretext of visiting the International Exhibition in Paris. He did not return to his post in Isfahan.

A few details of the later years of his life in Paris have been recorded by other eyewitnesses. He is pictured as a depressive, withdrawn person
spending his life entirely on the study of Persian manuscripts in the Bibliothèque Nationale. The only person with whom he was more of less befriended was Edgar Blochet, the keeper of the Oriental department of the library. The well-known Persian scholar Muḥammad Qazvīnī, who worked at the Paris library at the same time, remarked that Ḥusayn and Blochet shared a profound dislike of their fellow human beings. Ḥusayn refused to have any contacts with his compatriots. When the Iranian ambassador needed to talk to him he had to act as a postman in order to gain access to Ḥusayn’s appartement. This lonely life came to an end in March 1938, when Ḥusayn was run over by a car on a Paris street. His collection of books and manuscripts, which he valued so highly, was auctioned in London at Quaritz.

La Roseraie du Savoir

Instead of the magnum opus he had dreamed about in Isfahan, Ḥusayn-i ʿĀẓād prepared in Paris four anthologies from Persian poetry in a French prose translation, starting in 1903 with an anthology of fragments from the ghazals of Bābā Fīghānī (fl. about 1500), Les Perles de la Couronne, introduced by a sketch of the history and the main features of the Persian ghazal. The series was concluded in 1916 by Guèpes et Papillons, a volume containing short pieces of Persian poetry which he called “épigrammes et madrigaux.” The first and the last anthologies contain only French translations, but the second and third were accompanied by the separately bound Persian texts, printed in Leiden. In 1906 the aforementioned La Roseraie du Savoir, and the Persian text entitled Gulshan-i maʿrifat (The Rosegarden of Knowledge), were published. This was followed in 1909 by l’Aube de l’-Espérance, and the Persian Šuh-i Ummād (The Dawn of Hope), devoted to fragments from mathnāvs, longer poems with a narrative or didactical content. ʿĀẓād’s aim was to acquaint the European public not only with selected specimens of the most important forms of Persian poetry, but also with the basic ideas and themes of Persian mysticism. The Dutch poet Leopold used both the Roseraie and the Aube for his versions of Persian poems, but his confrere Boutens concentrated on the volume of quatrains.

La Roseraie du Savoir is a volume of 470 mystical quatrains by Persian poets who lived between the eleventh and the nineteenth centuries. The earliest were three great mystics – Abū Saʿīd, Kharaqānī and Ansārī of Herat – who all lived in the eleventh century. Other great names from the mediaeval Sufi tradition represented are Sanāʾī, Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār, Rūmī, Saʿdī, Jāmī, and Bābā Afdāl. Most of the poets in this anthology lived in Safavid times or later. By far the most often cited poet is Saḥābī of Astarābād, a prolific writer of quatrains who lived as a seclude in the Shiʿite holy city of Najaf in Iraq in the late sixteenth century. Many of
these poets are no more than names to us. Āzād does not give many details concerning his sources, but it is obvious that he relied much on the great Persian anthologies, the *tadhkiras*. Most of these works were compiled between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, in both Iran and India. The youngest poet is Rīdā-Qul Khān Hidāyat, who died in 1871, and was therefore partly a contemporary of Āzād. He was also the author of two comprehensive anthologies of Persian poetry that are both cited by Āzād.

The *Roseraie* is divided into twelve chapters and a short epilogue. The headings refer to central Sufi themes, such as “De la connaissance de Dieu”, “La création et l’Homme”, “l’Orgeuil et l’Humilité”, “La vanité du Monde”, and “Le véritable Amour”. The poems are distributed over these chapters on the basis of their contents without any regard of chronology. This suggests that they are selected to document a perennial mystical wisdom, unchanged over more than eight centuries.

A passage in the introduction tells something about Āzād’s motivation. He points to the great enthusiasm in the West for 'Umar Khayyām, which in the first decade of the twentieth century was at its apogee:

*The first idea to write this book came to me a few years ago in Isfahan during a conversation with an officer of the British-Indian army. He had a fine taste and was a great lover of literature. When we touched upon the subject of Persian poetry he revealed to me his passion for Khayyām and told me how much he was admired in England. I was deeply moved by his words, but a bit like the person from Tabriz in front of whom someone boasts of the fruits in his hometown, whereas Tabriz produces excellent fruits of all kinds.*

This Western craze contrasted with the almost complete ignorance of the poems of the famous scholar among Iranians at the time. Āzād found the exclusive attention devoted to Khayyām’s *rubā’iyāt* in Europe and America exaggerated and onesided. He wanted to balance this by assembling a volume of quatrains which he regarded as at least as interesting as those of 'Umar. His own collection contained just three quatrains ascribed to 'Umar. His personal favourite was the mystical sheikh Abû Sa’îd. He claims that many cultivated people in Persia shared this view. Risking the outrage of the members of the London Khayyām Club, he declares that he would gladly give the entire poetical output of the “algebrarian of Nishapur” in exchange for fifty quatrains by Abû Sa’îd.

The notes to the French translation are very copious, as they are in Āzād’s other anthologies. He turns into every side-path that presents itself to him. One cannot escape the impression that he likes to show off his erudition, which was indeed amazing. However, these digressions are a rich source of information about his frame of mind and his preferences. His principal aim in collecting these anthologies was to make Persian literature
better known to the Western public and to demonstrate how much these poems have in common with the works of their own poets, philosophers and mystics. To enable them to make the comparison he cites not only many prominent French writers, but also great names from English and German literature. Among the philosophers Schopenhauer, *le Sage de Francfort*, is one his favorites. He is well read in the devotional works that would be familiar to his French Catholic readers and frequently cites from Blaise Pascal, the letters of St. François de Sales and other Christian saints. He is familiar with the works of some of the Orientalists of the nineteenth century, such as Nathaniel Bland, Joseph Garcin de Tassy and Hermann Ethé. Several times he refers critically to the French translation of Khayyām’s quatrains by J.B. Nicolas, notorious for his consistently mystical readings, but not once to FitzGerald, although the fame of the *Rubāiyāt* was the cause of his own project.

**Ḫūsayn-i Āzād and Modern Persian Culture**

The course of Āzād’s life made him into a marginal figure in modern Persian culture. As we saw, he did not participate at all in the political life of his country, but he also did not make any contribution to the renewal of Persian literature, the great concern of most other poets and writers of his time. His upbringing and his early contacts with the leading modernists of the mid-nineteenth century gave him a broad outlook on both Western and traditional Persian culture. This could have been a strong incentive to make an important contribution to a new synthesis of East and West. Yet he did not take this course.

The main reasons for his isolation in self-imposed exile seem to have been the traumatic experiences after his return to Persia, first among them the cruel fate of his father and his own humiliation at the court of Isfahan, where he was confronted with Qajar despotism in its ugliest form. His life shows some similarities with that of the modern prose writer Ṣādiq Hidāyat, a loner like Āzād, who in 1951 also died as an exile in Paris. The two men, both descendants from the elite of the Qajar period, shared a pessimistic outlook on the development of Persian society in their lifetimes. However, the manner in which they reacted was quite different. Hidāyat, unlike Āzād, sought inspiration in the pre-Islamic past and in the popular culture of Persia, not in the traditional high literature of the Islamic tradition and Persia’s mystical heritage. The sole classical poet whom he admired was ‘Umar Khayyām, in whom he recognized the reflection of his own worldview.

In spite of his almost pathological avoidance of his compatriots during his later life in Paris, Āzād shows a missionary zeal to share the treasures of his own culture with the Western public. He was constantly searching for points of similarities between Christian and Muslim cultural traditions.
His own religious beliefs are by no means clear. Wilfrid Sparroy discussed free thought and faith with him, and said that he was “an agnostic, who would like to know.”\textsuperscript{16} He had a strange affinity for Catholic spirituality, but there is no indication that he had become a Christian, though he was probably not a Muslim anymore. Even his great interest in Sufism seems to be that of an interested outsider, not of a true mystic, let alone a practising Sufi. One of the last translations in this anthology is a quatrain by Jâmi:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Lorsque l’Océan respire, il se produit ce qu’on nomme des vapeurs; celles-ci se réunissant forment une masse qui s’appelle un nuage. Le nuage répand des gouttes (d’eau) et se change en pluie; cette pluie devient un torrent, et finalement le torrent retourne à la mer}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
(When the ocean exhaled, it produces what one calls vapours; these unite to form a mass that is called a cloud. The cloud scatters drops and turns into rain; this rain becomes a flood, and finally the flood returns to the ocean.)
\end{quote}

In this image of the circular course of existence Āzād recognizes the fundamental Sufi doctrine.\textsuperscript{17}

The only place in the world where Ḩusayn-i Āzād’s work received a noticeable response was the Netherlands. He was fortunate to attract the attention of two outstanding Dutch poets of the early twentieth century, Pieter Boutens and Johan Hendrik Leopold. They were both inspired by his anthologies, although they knew nothing about the anthologist or the poets represented in his \textit{Roseraie du Savoir}, and very little about the Persian language and its literature. On the other hand, it was also Āzād’s fate that he landed up in the secret garden of a national culture, enclosed by the forbidding wall of the Dutch language.

\section*{Notes}


2 On the reception of Khayyām’s quatrains in the Netherlands, see the essay by Marco Goud.


8 Ibid., p. 165.


10 A biographical notice on Mírzá Husayn Kháñ Ázád is contained in Mahdí Bándád, *Sharb-e bál-e ríjá’-e Írán*, 4 volumes, 2nd print, Tehran: Zavvár, 1371/1992, I, p. 378, citing from Tárfkh-i Isfaháñ va Ray by Hájí Mírzá Hasan Ánsúr, who was a collaborator of Husayn during his years at the court of Zill al-Sulťán. Bándád also enters notices on Husayn father (IV, pp. 490-493) and his nephew Sádiq Mustáshár al-Dowla (II, pp. 166-168), a progressive member of the first two Persian parliaments. I owe these references to the kind help of Dr. Iraj Afshar.

11 Leopold’s translations from the Roseraie have been studied by G.J. Dorleijn (*J.H. Leopold Gedichten uit de nalatenschap*, 2 volumes, Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij, 1984, from the perspective of modern Dutch poetry. Much less attention has been paid to the translations of Boutens.


13 Ibidem, p. viii.


17 Hocéijne Ázád, *La Roseraie*, pp. 343-344, quatrain nr. 469.

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**Bibliography**


