

*METHODS IN LITERARY SCHOLARSHIP AND
THE LITERATURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST*

As of the turn of the century, Iran has become part of the Western cultural sphere. Empirical methods have forced a way into Iranian literary criticism, though somewhat more slowly, perhaps, than in India, which had endured a long period of British rule. In his work 'Ši^cr ul-Ağam', Šiblī Nu^cmānī appeared as a representative of empirical and critical methods decades before corresponding phenomena rose to the surface in Iran. Developments in Iran have since then been fairly rapid. Muḥammad Mo^cīn's study 'Ḥāfiẓ-e Širīn Sukhan' (1938) is still an example of literary scholarship marked by a romantic outlook in the Iranian tradition. The word 'genius' occurs with rather naive frequency in the chapter titles of the book. Qāsem Ghanī's study on Ḥāfiẓ is an example of a work in which the empirical method has not been an end in itself but has produced lasting results.

A certain oblique trend is to be seen, however, in Iranian literary scholarship. It is as if the Iranians were lagging 70 years behind the Europeans. The belief is held that an exact and firm grip can be obtained on humanistic studies with the same methods as on empirical natural sciences. The result is historical detail work. It is believed that the 'sure' methods of science are also applicable to the study of literature. This is not stated in so many words and, in general, methods are not discussed; but the underlying point of view is noticeable in, for instance, congress presentations. On the other hand, there prevails a striving for impressionistic eloquence, in which there is no method whatsoever. In Iranian literature, there cannot be found any philosophically or aesthetically grounded research procedures. I have in hand, to be sure, a psychoanalytical study written about Sadeq Hedayat; but I do not think it would be translated into European languages — to that extent are the author's conclusions on the naive side. It is hardly an accident that the difficulty experienced by the Iranians in embracing philosophical methods or methods resting on an aesthetic basis coincides with the period when Sufism lost its significance in Iran. In earlier times, Sufism had the capability of dealing with and shaping ideas — ideas that, admittedly, cannot be touched or held in the hand. Who is capable of laying a hand on the laws of Hegelian dialectics? Yet they shape the senseless mass of 'given' reality!

Mohammed Iqbal's 'History of Metaphysical Thought in Persia' reveals how this capacity for metaphysical thought and the generation of significant ideas gradually dwindled away, on the whole, starting in the 18th century. It is symptomatic, incidentally, that the capacity for philosophical thought remains in strength in India and not in Iran. Are the reasons for this of an internal or external nature, specifically the state of shock caused by European occupation and the resulting adrenalin injection? Whatever the reasons, Iqbal was capable of shaping ideas — and expressly ideas of scope and originality. It is somehow understandable that Iqbal should enjoy such slight favor in Iran. There are, to be sure, tens of thousands of 'thinkers' in Iran, but their ideas either represent a stereotyped repetition of old philosophy or, then, are somehow impossible, like Ahmed Kasravi's judgments concerning the classical Iranian writers.

Sufism nowadays influences modern Iranian cultural life exactly to the same degree as Viennese romanticism influenced Ravel's orchestral work 'La Valse'. We can see a change in Sadeq Hedayat. He no longer pretends to be a Sufist; and in observing himself to be incapable of thinking in the manner of a Sufist, he draws the logical conclusion and, as he himself puts it, pisses on the works of those old masters. In his youthful work 'The Blind Owl', he still strains his eyes for Sufistic vistas in the fine opium dreams, which recur at regular intervals in the book. These splendid passages contain, as a matter of fact, the best Iranian synthesis of, on the one hand, the desperate attempts to return to Sufistic views and, on the other, genuinely emerging modern European sensibilities, of literary visionariness à la Rimbaud. Starting with Hedayat, the European literary scene is as one with the Iranian. Hedayat's family is famous for its statesmen; Sādeq Khān Divāne, in the numerous family of Hedayats, undoubtedly did Iran the greatest service.

I once discussed this fallacious positivistic problem in Iran with a native sage. He was of the opinion that Iranian literary scholarship sees before it a whole mountain of basic research to be done: the factual material contained in the ancient biographies of poets would have to be extracted, etc. There is the danger, however, that if the present positivistic trend of scholarship continues, the studies produced will be stillborn and lifeless, like Byzantine science.

The Iranian dilemma is clearly revealed by, for example, Z. Safa's study 'Un aperçu sur l'évolution de la pensée à travers la poésie persane' in V. Minorsky's ceremonial volume entitled 'Yādnāme-ye Īrānī-ye Minorsky', which I have perused with interest. What I was able to glean from this particular study proved to be of only shadowy substance.

Instead of probing the character of great epochs of the human spirit, the piece consisted of self-evident platitudes arranged in a historical sequence. Plenty of ornamental phrases lacking any solid continuous line about the Iranian classics!

The fact of the matter is, sadly enough, that the Oriental scholarship of Europe is scarcely a whit in advance of the Iranian. Belief in methods borrowed from the natural sciences continues to be regrettably common. Certain minor exceptions do exist, but otherwise Iranian scholarship appears to be innocent of the knowledge that the methods of natural science have nearly totally been abandoned elsewhere by literary scholars since the decade of the 1920s. Historicist studies of the type published about Iranian literature would hardly be printed in the best literary journals of Europe and America. The editors of the *Kenyon Review*, *Partisan Review*, *Times Literary Supplement*, or *Bonniers Litterära Magasin* would simply consider them below par in intellectual content and decide that the authors had nothing really to say of more than narrowly academic interest. Such academic exercises might serve an author's obscure private interests only and to that extent can be branded as dishonest in their aims. The literary methods applied in Western Iranistic scholarship have been acquired in the Latin classes of English public schools and in the classical lyceums of Germany and date back to the times of classical antiquity and draw on the rhetoric of that ancient day. Such methods are actually 2000 years old!

There are, to be sure, exceptions, too. Ritter has displayed original thinking in his study 'Über die Bildersprache Nizāmī's', which, though of slight physical size, looms large in Iranian scholarship because qualitatively it is rarer than a white raven. Von Grunebaum is to be commended on the intelligence of his 'The Aesthetic Foundation of Arabic Literature'. Jan Rypka wrote his work with an insight and sensibility worthy of its subject matter. With few exceptions, all the rest have wondered and borrowed from each other as if from unique models instead of at least taking the trouble to glance momentarily at the tremendous wealth of literary methods developed elsewhere in our age. This would have demanded of the literary scholar an impossible feat, namely, acquainting himself with literary scholarship! Psychoanalytic criticism, Myth Criticism, archetypes, the numerous school representing the New Criticism, the Marxist new structuralism, the older East European formalism — all have traveled their own roads. Yet every one of these schools of critical thought has also taken the position that fact-hunting has had its day. Of this evolutionary development of the past seven decades in their own field, European students of Middle-Eastern literature have been blissfully ignorant.

In one of the foregoing studies of mine, I consider Aristotle's relation to the Arabic-Persian thinkers. The Iranists have also entertained strange ideas about Aristotle, ideas nowise more advanced than those held by the Arabic students of Aristotle back in the period between the 9th and 13th centuries. It is as if nobody had bothered to step over to a neighboring yard for a look around; that is, nobody seems to have peeked into some elementary philosophy textbook to find out what the generally accepted view might be concerning, for example, Aristotle's universals. It is sages of this unenterprising type, then, that lecture to one another about charlatanry in research. But who is a charlatan? A literary scholar that overlooks the elements of modern literary scholarship? A self-styled authority on Aristotle that lacks a knowledge of basic Aristotelian concepts? To me, the quack, the thaumaturg, the liar of the first magnitude, has a mysterious quality about him; he stretches the imagination towards the signs of the infinite. Doing this, he goes beyond the scope of the usual scholarly breadwinner.

In the foregoing essays, the reader is confronted with a multitude of methods. In the field of research into Iranian literature, I have tried to open windows for views of neighboring fields of scholarship, windows that ought to be kept open anyway to avoid narrow confinement and darkness. In doing this, which I thought to be only natural and an obvious necessity, I have not, however, been able to avoid a feeling that I shall be blamed also for breaking the window frames of scholarship. I do not contest that I have, indeed, tried at every turn to escape the clutches of factualism to gain the freedom of non-academic thought. In my work, I have not adhered to conventional procedures; I have not done my research along lines sanctified by 'bone-hard' academicism. Rather have I made my exploratory expeditions into the Iranian realm in the spirit of private inquiry and personal pleasure.

It has given me a kick to see things in an unconventional, different light — different at any cost. Consequently, the astonished academic reader may, perhaps, find in my presentation plenty of »East-European obscurantism«, as one venerable Persian professor, who had been won over to the positivistic cause at a late date, remarked upon being informed of certain parts of my studies. Psychoanalytic, theosophic, Soviet Marxist-structuralistic, and formalistic material has, along with the contributions of the New Criticism, proved to be as valuable to me as the so-called 'scientific' approach. I have further used the fairy-tale as a mode of scholarly presentation; this can be defended quite easily, provided the result is readable matter. It can be justified even more in the face of the profusion of publications containing dry-as-dust stuff written in the name of factual science, stuff of no interest or use to

anybody except the author, who dishes it out to serve his own, previously mentioned obscure academic ends.

Those massive mountains of facts found in the annals put out by academic institutions can hardly tempt one to cast a grain of information more at the foot of the mountains. As I look at it, these formidable accumulations of research data have only been waiting — and this has been even said in quite a few studies — for somebody to come along and try to do something with them. That somebody ought, if only by way of a demonstration, attempt a synthesis. Surely, the idea behind the fact-collecting has been that the data would eventually lend themselves to synthetic treatment. As far as I am personally concerned, the only really interesting things in the field of scholarship are the syntheses and conclusions.

Maybe I have offended some of my readers by delivering my views straight from the shoulder.

Experience has taught me, however, that in matters of this kind false modesty does not pay off. A display of modesty only too often is used to provide an excuse for modest or mediocre results.