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Sir William Jones and the *Shahnameh*

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Abstract

The second half of the eighteenth century was a period of transition in European aesthetics. It was also a time of increasing contact between Europe and Asia. The rise of Oriental literary scholarship was a natural outgrowth of the public interest in things Oriental. While the earlier part of the century had sought to reaffirm the basic tenets of the Enlightenment with the help of its indirect knowledge of the Oriental literatures, the later generations became increasingly fascinated with the new possibilities of the literary heritage of the East. The *Shahnameh* first attracted the attention of the eighteenth-century Orientalists such as Sir William Jones as the supreme example of Oriental epic poetry. The present essay proposes to study Jones's conception of Persian literature and his remarks on the poetry of Firdawsi, as well as his fragmentary translations of the *Shahnameh*.

Keywords: Sir William Jones, *Shahnameh*, Firdawsi, Orientalism.

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1. Introduction

The second half of the eighteenth century was a period of transition in European aesthetics. It was also a time of increasing contact between Europe and Asia. By mid-century the Dutch had already surrendered their powerful Eastern headquarters to the British, thus leaving the French and the British to pursue their century-long rivalries in Asia. By 1770 the European trading companies in Asia were vigorously pushing their highly lucrative ventures with the aid of the local princes and war-lords. The British East India Company had already grown into a giant colonial power. Its servants amassed an immediate fortune in India, returning to Europe as immensely rich men. The passage of Lord North's Regulating Act of 1773, the long trial of Warren Hastings, and numerous instances of parliamentary inquiries into the irregularities of the Company had forced India on the consciousness of any literate Englishman. All Europe was enjoying products from Asia and talking about the land of pearls, spices and poetry.

The rise of Oriental literary scholarship was a natural outgrowth of the public interest in things Oriental. While the earlier part of the century had sought to reaffirm the basic tenets of the Enlightenment with the help of its indirect knowledge of the Oriental literatures, the later generations became increasingly fascinated with the new possibilities of the literary heritage of the East. As the rise of the various European vernaculars in the Renaissance had brought about the common conception of European literature, eventually giving rise to the cosmopolitan character of the Enlightenment, so the rise of Oriental studies was beginning to influence the European aesthetics. Pioneering Orientalists were beginning to reshape the East into a new configuration so dear to the Romantic poets that followed them. At the same time, various culture-bound factors affected the evolution of the Romantic attitude towards the East. For instance, while a move towards a relativistic approach to literary criteria was common to all the European cultures, the pace varied from country to country. Also,

the rise of historical criticism, as applied to Oriental literatures, was to a large extent a continental phenomenon. On the continent, too, Germany alone idealized the East into an alternative, and more attractive, aesthetic whole, capable of replacing the Greco-Roman literary heritage.

Admittedly, all this complicates any attempt to analyze the impact of the Oriental literatures on European aesthetics. Nevertheless, without the imposition of pre-conceived patterns, compartmentalization of tendencies, or establishment of rigid chronologies, it is, I believe, still possible to identify in this period an Oriental stimulus in the gradual departures from the established aesthetics of the earlier decades. It is in this sense that pre-Romanticism, signifying the predilections of that generation of European men of letters who delivered the stimulus of the Oriental literatures to suit the Romantic imagination finds its true meaning. Themselves products of the neo-classical aesthetic thought, men like Herder and Jones actually left a substantially different legacy for the generation that followed. It is not an accident that in England, for instance, the most authoritative voices of the period bestowed such epithets as "the greatest living poet" and "the most celebrated scholar of all time" on Sir William Jones, a man known throughout Europe for his achievements in Orientalism.

2. Sir William Jones and the *Shahnameh*

It was to Sir William Jones that Joseph Champion, the first European translator of a segment of the *Shahnameh* dedicated his work. In fact, Jones's conception of Persian literature and his remarks on the poetry of Firdawsi, as well as his fragmentary translations of the *Shahnameh*, underlay the efforts of a generation of European translators and commentators of the Persian epic. Jones's importance as a pioneer Orientalist of the highest rank was felt throughout Europe, for he wrote his critical essays in Latin, English and French. He also

translated an impressively wide variety of the Eastern literary works into these three languages. Other scholars of the age translated his essays and translations into other European languages. Herder's imitations and adaptations of Jones's translations from the *Gulistan* of Sa'di is an example.[1] In his "analyse du poeme de Ferdoussy, sur les Rois de Perse," Louis Mathieu Langlfes says: "Je presenterai seulement ici l'observation de M. Jones, savant anglais, qui par un assemblage bien rare, reunit un gout delicat a une profonde erudition."[2] An understanding of Jones's ideas both as an influential Orientalist and as a pre-Romantic poet and critic of imposing stature is, therefore, central to any discussion of the earliest European conception of the *Shahnameh*.

As a critic and a staunch defender of Oriental and romantic literatures, Jones, along with such prominent contemporary figures as Bishop Lowth and William Duff, insisted that the medieval and Oriental literatures should not be judged by classical standards but according to their own conventions. As a poet, Jones was a towering figure of his time, one whose life was eulogized, his creations applauded and his judgment revered. As prominent a man as Samuel Johnson called him "the most enlightened of the sons of men." The most important literary periodicals of the time, *The Monthly Review* and *The Gentleman's Magazine*, bestowed lavish praise on him, marveling at the depth and breadth of his knowledge. Instances are too many to enumerate, but the panegyric language of *The Monthly Review* is not atypical.

In its issue for May I787, on the occasion of the appearance of the first volume of *The Asiatick Miscellany*, *The Monthly Review* devoted several essays to the life and works of Sir William Jones, calling him

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1 Of Herder's four books of translations and adaptations known as *Blumen aus Morgenlandischen Dichtem Gesammlet*, three consist entirely of maxims from Sa'di's *Gulistan*.

2 Louis Mathieu Langles, *Contes, Fables et Sentences*. Tires de Diffdrens Auteurs Arabes et Persans, avec une analyse du poeme de Ferdoussy, sur les Rois de Perse … (Paris: Royez, 1788), p. I36.

one of the "examples of genius and erudition,— designed by Providence to exhibit the human intellect in its most cultivated state, and to supply every age with living instances of that excellence, which, were it visible only in the annals of antiquity, might entirely escape the notice of many, and be regarded by others as the meteor of a more favored sky; too fleeting to justify any hope of its return, and too dazzling to be contemplated even in description."[1] In short, Jones exercised a direct influence in the shift from the neo-classical view of literature as imitation of a universal nature and in accordance with the rules of art to the view of literature as an imaginative re-creation of a changeable and changing reality.

Jones's enthusiasm towards the Oriental literatures in general enhanced the involvement of Europe with the Eastern cultures. His example guided many future Orientalists in their scholarly undertakings. His practice as a translator of the Oriental literatures was emulated with varying degrees of success throughout the nineteenth century. Finally, his high esteem for the *Shahnameh* of Firdawsi inspired many European attempts to come to terms with the Persian epic.

Jones began to study Persian and Arabic at Oxford in 1764 with the characteristic zeal of a true pioneer.[2] By 1768 he already seems to have earned a reputation for his knowledge of Persian. King Christian VII of Denmark, visiting England in that year, asked him to translate

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1 *The Monthly Review*. May 1781, p. 414.

2 This account of the life and works of Sir William Jones is based, aside from his own works, on the following:

(1) Lord Teignmouth's *Memoirs of the Life, Writings and Correspondences of Sir William Jones*, 2nd edition (London: J. Hatchaird, 1806);

(2) Garland H. Cannon, *Sir William Jones, Orientalis: An Annotated Bibliography of His Works* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1952);

(3) Garland H. Cannon, *Oriental Jones* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1964);

(4) A. J. Arberry, "The Founder: William Jones", *Oriental Essays*, op. cit;.

(5) Hasan Javadi, "Persian Literary Influence in English Literature," *Indo-Iranica*, vol.XXV, No. 2 (June 1972), pp. 70-91; and

(6) S. N. Mukherjee, *Sir William Jones: A Study in Eighteenth-Century British Attitudes to India* (London:Cambridge University Press, 1966).

into French a Persian manuscript written only a few years, before by Mirza Mihdi on the history of Nadir Shah, the king of Persia (1736-1747). Jones accepted and the book appeared in 1770 under the title *L'Histoire de Nader Chah*. Jones appended three introductory essays to the book. "A Description of Asia," "A Short History of Persia," and an extensive essay entitled "Traite sur la Poesie Orientale." In the latter essay, he deals with various types of Oriental poetry: epic, lyric, elegiac, didactic, satiric and panegyric. He singles out Firdawsi, Hafiz and Sa'di as the greatest Persian epic, lyric and didactic poets respectively. He concludes the essay with a section containing a French translation of thirteen Odes by Hafiz. These odes were the first of his several hundred translations of Hafiz, the poet whom Jones regarded as his favorite. Section II of the essay, bearing the title "Sur la Poesie heroique des Nations Orientales," is the first essay of any notable length and depth concerning the *Shahnameh* and will "be explored in connection with Jones's estimate of the work.

In 1771 Jones published a "Dissertation sur la litterature Orientale," in which he declares his purpose to try to dissipate prejudice and attract the attention of Europe to the richness of Oriental—mainly Persian and Arabic—history, philosophy and poetry. He argues that these cultures are easily accessible through the study of their languages. At the conclusion of the essay he addresses the rulers of Europe in an eloquent plea asking them to encourage the study of Oriental languages in order to bring about a second Renaissance. A year later his essay "On the Arts, Commonly Called Imitative," perhaps the most far-reaching formulation of a distinctly pre-Romantic sensibility, was published.[1] Within the next decade or so,

1 In *The Mirror and the Lamp* (London:Oxford University Press, 1953), M. H. Abrams justly regards Jones's essay as "an explicit and orderly reformulation of the nature and criteria of poetry and of the poetic genres," an "extension of the expressive concept to music and painting," and an "inversion of aesthetic values." He calls Jones "the first writer in England to weave these threads into an explicit and orderly formulation" of

Jones continued to advocate, with growing force and confidence, the study of the Oriental languages and cultures in his numerous and varied writings.

Jones seizes every opportunity to plead for a first-hand knowledge of the Oriental literatures by all men of Europe. Oriental studies, he declares, must become an integral part of a broad and universal system of knowledge for the Europeans. His own unceasing efforts in realizing this goal, earned him an impressive following.

To facilitate the attainment of direct knowledge by the Europeans of the Oriental languages, Jones published in 1771 *A Grammar of the Persian Language*, the first systematic attempt of its kind "by a European. In the Preface he discussed the threefold purposes behind the undertaking. First, the book was designed to help East India Company employees to learn Persian and thus communicate with the educated Indians. Secondly, it would help the educated men of Europe to realize that Persian literature could enrich their literatures. Finally, the *Grammar* might enable European scholars to translate Persian manuscripts in the interest of intellectual and cultural enhancement in the Western world.

In addition to a scholarly treatment of the Persian grammar, illustrated by ample examples from Persian poetry in the original and in English translations, the volume contains a section on prosody, a catalogue of classical Persian literature and an essay on the history of the Persian language. In the latter, Jones argues that historical change has vulgarized Persian. Comparing examples of the eighteenth-century Persian prose from his recently translated *L'Histoire de Nader Chah* with the poetry of Firdawsi, he concludes that Persian writing has deteriorated since the composition of the Shahnameh. Early in his career, Jones had come to view the diction of the *Shahnameh* as the standard of purity in Persian poetry worthy of a national epic.

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poetic theory. And yet, surprisingly, Abrams does not make an attempt to establish the connection between Jones's aesthetic ideas and his profoimd familiarity with Oriental literatures (pp. 87-88).

Despite its errors, Jones's *Grammar* enjoyed immediate success and a long useful life throughout Europe. It went into two French and a score of English editions. Over seventy years later Edward Fitzgerald, who was led by it to the *Rubaiyat*, Observed:

> As to Jones's *Grammar*, I have a sort of love for it; instead of such dry as dust scholars as usually make grammar, how much more than ever necessary it is to have men of poetic taste to do it, to make the thing as delightful as possible to learners.[1]

The *Grammar* strengthened Jones's reputation so much so that at twenty-five he was the most widely acclaimed Orientalist in Europe. Nevertheless, convinced that he did not want to make Orientalism his career, Jones decided to take up law, an undertaking which occupied him over the next decade or so.

Jones's Oriental activities received a welcome impetus in 1783 when he was appointed High Judge of the Judicature in Bengal, an appointment which he had been eagerly awaiting in order to resume his research. On the way to his mission, as he was approaching India aboard the frigate "Crocodile," Jones experienced something of a mystical vision concerning the Orient. As he reminisced some years later:

> India lay before us, and Persia on our left, whilst a breeze from Arabia blew nearly on our stern.... It gave me inexpressible pleasure to find myself in the midst of so noble an amphitheater, almost encircled by the vast regions of Asia, which has ever been esteemed the nurse of sciences, the inventress of delightful and useful arts, the scene of glorious actions, fertile in the productions of human genius,...

1 Letter to Edward Cowell, quoted in *Oriental Essays*, op. cit., p. 51.

> and infinitely diversified in the forms of religion and government, in the laws, manners, customs, and languages.[1]

Presently, these reflections led to the idea of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal. With the encouragement of Warren Hastings, the Governor-General of Bengal, the society was inaugurated in January 1784 with Sir William Jones as its first president. The society thrived and its membership grew to around one hundred within the first decade of its existence. Its periodical publications, *The Asiatick Researches* and *The Asiatick Miscellany*, enjoyed great demand, were received with tremendous enthusiasm, and were translated into various European languages. They are known to have been read by such authors as Quinet, Lamartine, Schlegel, Goethe, Moore and Southey. They might very well have reached many others either directly or through extensive reviews in various literary periodicals of the turn of the century. The Asiatic Society of Bengal also spurred the foundation of several Asiatic societies in Europe including the Asiatic Society of St. Petersburg (1810), the *Societe Asiatique* of Paris (1822), the Royal London Asiatic Society (1823), and the *Deutsche Morgenlandische Gesellschaft* in the l840s.

Jones became familiar with the *Shahnameh* early in his life, and his opinion of it evolved- throughout his career. His many imitations and translations of ideas, stories and fragments of the *Shahnameh* reveal his lifelong involvement with a work which he regarded as "a glorious monument of Eastern genius and learning; which, if ever it should be generally understood in its original language, will contest the merit of

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1 *Asiatick Researches*, vol. I (Calcutta, I788) pp. ix-x.
The original quarto edition of this work was published in Calcutta in 1788 and was continued until I839. A pirated edition of the first eight volumes was brought out in England in 1798, and within the next five or six years, two other editions were issued in octavo. In addition to these, two volumes were translated into French (*Recherches Asiatigues*, Paris, 1805) and four volumes into German (*Abhandlungen uber die Geschichte und Alterhumer. Kunste. Wissenschaften und Literatur Asiens*, Riga, 1795-1797).

invention with Homer himself."[1] His numerous pronouncements, dissertations and essays on the *Shahnameh* are rooted in his critical attitude towards the Oriental literatures, and ultimately in his relativistic aesthetic sensibility. As soon as he became familiar with Arabic and Persian, Jones began to question the neoclassical doctrine that Latin and Greek were the most perfect languages, and therefore vehicles of the greatest literature and culture. Furthermore, he argued that the mythology, subject matter and imagery of Oriental literatures could be used to improve European poetry which, he believed, had become stale and stagnant because of its total dependence on the classical heritage.

Jones may have been led by the example of the national epic of Persia to write his own national epic, "Britain Discovered," which he described as "a heroic poem on the excellence of our Constitution, and the character of a perfect king of England."[2] The plan was never carried out beyond a short summary of each of the twelve books and the actual composition of four stanzas. The idea of the perfect king in a national epic may, however, have been suggested to him by the story of Kay-Khusraw in the *Shahnameh*. an episode which Jones found noble and edifying. Also, as early as 1769, he had formed the idea of writing a tragedy on the murder of the Ottoman Mustafa by his father Sulayman I. Years later, after he had read the *Shahnameh* two more times in India, he became so fascinated by the story of Suhrab that he revised his early plans and decided on a play on that subject, along the lines of Greek tragedy with a chorus of Persian magi. According to his biographer, Lord Teignmouth, Jones revised and corrected his planned tragedy several times. Even though he modelled the tragedy of Suhrab after the Greek tragedy, Teignmouth stresses that Jones "certainly intended to observe a strict adherence to the costume of the age and the country, in which the events of his Tragedy were supposed to have occurred."

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1 *The Works of Sir William Jones*, op. cit.,V. p. 246.
2 Garland H. Cannon, *Oriental Jones*, op. cit., p. 20.

Once again, a summary of the action and a single epode are all that was carried through. The epode, the only part of the plan which Teignmouth considers "sufficiently complete for the reader's perusal," goes thus:

> What power, beyond all powers elate.
> Sustains this universal frame?
> 'Tis not nature, 'tis not fate,
> 'Tis not the dajice of atoms blind,
> Etherial space, or subtile flame;
> No; 'tis one vast eternal mind,
> Too sacred for an earthly name.
> He forms, pervades, directs the whole,
> Not like the macrocosm's imag'd soul.
> But provident of endless good,
> By ways nor seen, nor understood.
> Which e'en his angels vainly might explore.
> High, their highest thoughts above.
> Truth, wisdom, justice, mercy, love.
> Wrought in his heav'nly essence, blaze and soar.
> Mortals, who his glory seek,
> Rapt in contemplation meek,
> Him fear, him trust, him venerate, him adore.[1]

Of the many short pieces which Jones wrote employing the ideas of specific Persian poems, only one, a quatrain, is based on a couplet by Firdawsi:

> Crush not yon ant, who stores the golden grain;

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1 *The Works of Sir Williaim Jones*, op. cit. II, pp. 506-513.
Lord Teignmouth, Jones's biographer, relates the circiimstances of Jones's plan in these words: "Amongst the manuscript papers of Sir William Jones, written in Bengal, I find the delineation of the plan of a Tragedy on the story of SOHRAB, a Persian hero, who acts a short, but conspicuous part in the heroic poem of Ferdusi, the Homer of Persia."

He lives with pleasure, and will die with pain;
Learn from him rather to secure the spoil
Of patient cares and persevering toil.[1]

This quatrain gained immediate and wide popularity, presently appearing in many literary periodicals. Some years later, when he was delivering his "Tenth Anniversary Discourse" as the president of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, he gave the thought a new dress. "Nor shall I ever forget," he said, speaking of the pain that objects of scientific examinations are subjected to, "the couplet of Firdawsi, for which Sa'di, who cites it with applause, pours blessings on his departed spirit: Ah! Spare yon emmet, rich in hoarded grain:/ He lives with pleasure, and he dies with pain."[2]

Aside from such imitations which, like his well-known "Persian Song of Hafez," are regarded as Jones's own creations, and which figure among the most popular poems of the eighteenth-century English literature, Jones has left literal translations of several passages of the *Shahnameh* in Latin, French and English. These translations are mostly contained in his essays and are designed to support a particular argument or illustrate a specific point. But there is always a larger purpose behind the translations. In one of his repeated pleas for the translation of the *Shahnameh,* he writes; "the heroic poem of Firdawsi might be versified as easily as the Iliad, and I see no reason why the Delivery of Persia by Cyrus should not be a subject as interesting to us, as the anger of Achilles, or the wandering of Ulysses."[3] In his own translations, he was always eager to impress readers with the charm of the *Shahnameh* in order to encourage its translation. It is the mark of his pre-Romantic turn of mind that the passages he selects for translations axe the ones unique to the Persian epic.

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1 Quoted in *Oriental Jones,* op. cit., p. 148.
2 *The Works of Sir William Jones,* op. cit., Ill, p. 221.
3 *The Works of Sir William Jones,* op. cit.. X, p. 204.

Jones's fascination with accounts of romantic adventures in demon-haunted jungles, or passages which contain clusters of short similes, or those abounding in striking descriptions demonstrate his partiality to those features of the *Shahnameh* which distinguish it from the Iliad and the Aeneid. even though the Persian epic partakes of the epic tradition in its overall scope and content.

For example, Jones expresses admiration for the descriptive passages of the Shahnameh as the product of a "rich Oriental imagination." He praises Firdawsi's power of observation and compares the variety and precision of his descriptions with those in the Iliad. At the same time, he emphasizes that Firdawsi presents a different similitude, that as an "Oriental" poet, he is faithful to nature, but not necessarily that of the Greek poet:

> Les descriptions dans la *Chahnaméh* sont toujours variées et parfaitement bien travailées, sur-tout celles des batailles, qui sont aussi nombreuses que dans *1'Iliad*. Celles d'une plus agréable nature, comme de jardins, de banquet, de belles, n y sont pas moins admirables, et sont peintes par Ferdusi avec toute la richesse et l'enflure de l'imagination Orientale.[1]

The description of the province of Mazandaran, sung by a demon-poet, bent on luring the unsuspecting king of Persia to that demon-haunted realm, is one such passage:

> Un jardin dans lequel la rose perpetuellement fleurit, dont les bordures sont remplies de tulipes et d'hyacinthes; ou I'on n'eprouve ni chaleur immoderee, ni froid excessif; mais ou regne un eternal printemps, ou les rossiguols gazouillent sans cesse parmi les branches

1 *The Works of Sir William Jones*, op. cit., XII, p. 204.

d'arbres toujours verts; ou les antelopes jouent sur les coteaux.[1]

These lines run thus in the *Shahnameh*:

زمینش پر از لالـه و ســنبـل اســت که در بوســتانش همیشــه گل اســت
نـه گرم و نـه ســرد و همیشــه بهـار هـوا خـوش گـوار و زمـین پر نگـار
گـرازنـده آهـو بـه راغ انـدرون نـوازنـده بـلـبـل بـه بـاغ انـدرون

Jones's conception of the *Shahnameh*. both as a literary epic and as the national legend of ancient Persia, largely shaped the early European attitude towards the work. His ideas were in turn rooted in the pre-Romantic aesthetic sensibility which he espoused throughout his career. Although only a complete reading of Jones's numerous essays can reveal the exact nature of his aesthetic ideas, his views on the *Shahnameh* can be gleaned from some of the essays he wrote between 1770 and 1774, notably the essay entitled "On the Poetry of the Eastern Nations," the "Traits sur la Poesie Orientale," and "De Poesi Heroica." Written in English, French and Latin, and designed for different audiences, these early essays contain much repeated information. Nevertheless, they reflect enough continuity and diversity to enable us to follow the evolution of an idea in the mind of the author. "As to the great Epic poem of Ferdusi," Jones observes in the essay "On the Poetry of the Eastern Nations," "it would require a very long treatise to explain all its beauties with a minute exactness." Following a brief account of the work which he calls "a series of very noble poems," Jones singles out "the delivery of Persia by Cyrus from the oppression of Afrasiab" as one of the most regular heroic poems of the entire collection because of the greatness of the action it relates. He praises the variety and vividness of Firdawsi's characters, the bold

1 *The Works of Sir William Jones*, op. cit., XII, p. 204.

liveliness of his imagery and the nobility, polish and zest of his language. Jones concludes the discussion of the *Shahnameh* with the following observation:

> A great profusion of learning has been thrown away by some critics, in comparing Homer with the heroic poets, who have succeeded him: but it requires very little judgement to see, that no succeeding poet whatever can with any propriety be compared with Homer: that great father of the Grecian poetry and literature, had a genius too fruitful and comprehensive to let any of the striking parts of nature escape his observation; and the poets, who have followed him, have done little more than transcribe his images, and give a new dress to his thoughts. Whatever elegance and refinement, therefore, may have been introduced into the works of the modems, the spirit and invention of Homer have ever continued without a rival: for which reasons I am far from pretending to assert that the poet of Persia is equal to that of Greece; but there is certainly a very great resemblance between the works of those extraordinary men: both drew their images from nature herself, without catching them only by reflection, and painting in the manner of the modern poets, the likeness of a likeness; and both possessed, in an eminent degree, that rich and creative invention, which is the very soul of poetry.[1]

Homer, therefore, is supreme. Neither Virgil and Milton, nor Firdawsi, nor any other poet can be considered his equal. But there is a crucial difference here. The Western poets succeeding Homer "have done little more than transcribe" Homer's images, and put his thoughts

1 *The Works of Sir William Jones*, op. cit., X, pp. 354-355.

in a new dress. The Persian poet, on the other hand, like Homer and unlike Homer's successors, has drawn his images directly and immediately from nature. Through his "rich and creative invention," which he, like Homer, possesses in an eminent degree, he has transformed them into poetry. Firdawsi and Homer, in other words, share a closeness to nature and a sense of invention which is "the very soul of poetry." Their difference, whatever it is, is one of degree rather than kind.

Modem poets, on the other hand, are qualitatively inferior "by reason of their imitation, not of nature, but of Homer. Jones expresses here an idea of Homer very different from that of the Augustan critics. To him, Homer is no longer the instructor of eternal truth in entertaining fiction, but a man who had interpreted his age and his culture for posterity. Nature, too, signifies to Jones not the eternal constant which all poets should depict, but that which is the immediate subject of a poet's observation. In his view, therefore, Firdawsi and Homer are equally unique and valid to their respective traditions. A comparison of their works can be meaningful insofar as it relates each one to the literary heritage which gave rise to his work.

In the "Traite sur la Poesie Orientale," Jones devotes a section to the heroic poetry of the East. He begins with the observation that the Arabs have not produced what can properly be termed "epic." Their literature contains some narratives of historical accounts in verse, "but the epic essence is absent from these works. Persians and Turks, on the other hand, have produced numerous poetic accounts of the exploits and adventures of their great heroes, although these poems abound in extravagant fables and are, therefore, more akin to romance than to "poeme heroique." There is, however, one exception: "Les seuls ouvrages de Ferdusi peuvent justement réclamer ce titre." Presenting an account of the length and scope of the Shahnameh, Jones focuses on the story of Afrasiyab's invasion of Iran with the help of the Indian and Chinese forces, as well as of "tous les démons, les géans, and les enchanteurs de l'Asie." Rustam, the "prince du

Zablestan, l'Achille, ou plutôt I'Hercule de l'Orient," marches at the head of the Iranian forces against the invaders and, in a series of grand actions, defeats them.

Jones divides the *Shahnameh* into "douze chants, dont chacun pourroit etre distingue par les principaux événement qu'il renfermeroit." The division, and the underlying view of the *Shahnameh* as a series of heroic poems, chronologically related but aesthetically independent, is particularly significant to the history of the *Shahnameh* scholarship in Europe. Next Jones gives a brief account of two of the twelve episodes, praising in particular the poet's art of juxtaposing noble actions and tender feelings. "Les dis autres chants," he continues, "feroient également excellens, et diversifies par des événemens agréables." Once again Firdawsi's characterization is compared to that of Homer's. "Les caracteres de Ferdusi," Jones argues, "ne sont pas si variés que ceux d'Homere, mais ils ne sont pas moins bien frappés and soutenus." A catalog of Firdawsi's heroes follows, with their most striking heroic attributes and characteristics. In the *Shahnameh*, Jones observes, men are distinguished by their bravery and nobility, women by their beauty and tenderness. Exceptions, such as Tahmineh and Sudabeh, are noted for their outstanding qualities: a daring attitude towards love in one, a licentious hatred in the other. Hallmarks of Firdawsi's art consist of his narrative technique, his use of the epic diction, and his mastery of the heroic discourse.

Jones's "Traite" also contains interesting observations on the role of the supernatural in the *Shahnameh*. Magicians, demons, fairies and dragons, he says, appear along with heroes and heroines in various episodes. Jones comments extensively on the significance of such human characteristics as the power of speech given to Rustam's wonderful horse, Rakhsh, which, he argues, makes the animal a worthy companion of the heroe's adventures. He points to similarities between the enchantress who lures Rustam into the dark world of love and magic, and Circe as she appears in the *Odyssey*. The mention of Simurgh, the legendary phoenix who employs its magical powers in

the service of Rustam, moves Jones from the observation of affinities to the possibility of indirect influence.

The crux of Jones's views on the *Shahnameh* consists of the idea of the relative validity of the Persian poet to the Persian tradition. That idea is in turn based on a much broader pre-Romantic critical outlook, namely, the relativistic view that the Oriental and classical standards of aesthetic expression are equally valid and equally imbedded in poetic experience. Thus, the classical standards are not universal but relative; they do not offer the sole measure of literary excellence and cannot be applied to those aesthetic creations that accord to a different similitude. In order to justify his appreciation of Oriental literatures, Jones always traces the causes of the peculiarities of Oriental expression to the conditions of its production: climate and setting, characteristics of the people, customs, linguistic and literary standards and conventions. Almost invariably, he begins his discussions of various literatures of the East with an account of the country and culture under study.

In "An Essay on the Poetry of the Eastern Nations," he prefaces his remarks on Persian poetry with a description of the land, the climate, the rivers and deserts, the cloudless skies, and the calm summer nights. He attributes the frequency of allusions to heavenly bodies to the fact that on calm summer nights the Persians "sleep on the top of their houses, which are generally flat, where they cannot but observe the figures of the constellation, and the various appearances of the heavens." He proceeds to observe:

> We are apt to censure the oriental style for being so full of metaphors taken from the sun and moon; this is ascribed by some to the bad taste of the Asiaticks; *the works of the Persians,* says M. de Voltaire, *are like the titles of their kings, in which the sun and moon are often introduced*; but they do not reflect, that every nation has a set of images, and expressions, peculiar to itself,

> which are from the difference of its climate, manners, and history.[1]

To appreciate these peculiarities of the Oriental literatures, Jones maintains, Europeans must make allowances for the differences of natural and elemental conditions, and the historical, ethnic, linguistic and aesthetic features intrinsic to any culture. One must not apply European standards which have arisen from fundamentally different circumstances.

Ironically, this critical position, based on the recognition and affirmation of the existence of a variety of literary standards and conventions, seems to have been the logical result of the application of neoclassical principles of verisimilitude and adherence to nature. Poets are still required to be faithful to nature. However, nature is no longer the universally constant fountainhead of poetry that the Age of Reason believed it.

3. Final Remarks

Jones had approached the translation of the literary works of the Orient, keeping in mind a clear distinction between the task of the translator and the ambitions of literary creativity. In his translations of the odes of Hafiz, he often gives us two markedly different versions, clearly reflecting this distinction. As we have seen in this paper, his imitations of Firdawsi, too, are meticulously distinguished from his literal prose translations of the *Shahnameh*.

Many other critics and reviewers of the late eighteenth century, taking their clues from the Orientalists, attempted to further familiarize the literate men of Europe with the *Shahnameh* of Firdawsi. However, since their own knowledge of the work was indirect, their arguments were marked by an ever-present reliance on easily comprehensible but inevitably imprecise associations. By the

1 *The Works of Sir William Jones*, op. cit., X, p. 347.

turn of the century, in short, the literate men of Europe had generally become aware of the existence of a Persian Homer who had versified the annals of the ancient Persian kings and heroes. That this Homer of the East had been universally judged to have been inspired in his heroic task by the same force of genius and original invention as had inspired the Greek bard seemed beyond dispute. That he, like the father of the Grecian literature two thousand years before him, had given lofty expression to mighty deeds and desires was also becoming more and more evident.

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