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Love in Translation: Persian Poetry and the Romantic Revolt against Reason

Abstract I: Il saggio esplora l'intersezione tra la poesia persiana classica, il misticismo sufi e il Romanticismo inglese, esaminando i processi di traduzione e mediazione che resero tali tradizioni accessibili alla cultura britannica. Attraverso l'analisi dell'orientalismo di Sir William Jones e Isaac D'Israeli, il saggio prende *Layla e Majnun* di Nezami come caso di studio per indagare i tropi dell'amore assoluto, della follia e dell'annullamento dell'io ("*fanā'*"). Distinguendo metodologicamente tra ricezione documentata e affinità concettuali, l'analisi delle poetiche di Shelley e Keats mostra come il principio del *fanā'* sia messo in relazione con l'estetica occidentale secolare. Il lavoro offre così un paradigma interpretativo per riesaminare le formulazioni romantiche dell'identità poetica, della trascendenza del sé e della "*negative capability*".

Abstract II: This paper explores the intersection between classical Persian poetry, Sufi mysticism, and English Romanticism, examining the processes of translation and mediation that made these traditions accessible to British culture. Through an analysis of the Orientalist scholarship of Sir William Jones and Isaac D'Israeli, the study adopts Nezami's *Layla and Majnun* as a case study to investigate the tropes of absolute love, madness, and ego-annihilation ("*fanā'*"). By making a methodological distinction between documented reception and conceptual affinities, the analysis of Shelley's and Keats's poetics shows how the principle of *fanā'* can be read in relation to secular Western aesthetics. The paper thus offers an interpretive paradigm for re-examining Romantic formulations of poetic identity, self-transcendence, and "negative capability".

Keywords: British Romanticism, Sufism, Persian poetry, self-annihilation, negative capability.

> It is to the East that we must look
> for supreme ideals of Romanticism
> (Schlegel 1968: 81).

The Romantic fascination with the Orient has long been examined through a range of critical perspectives, among which Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) remains one of the most

influential touchstones in postcolonial studies. Said's framework brought crucial attention to the asymmetries of power embedded in Western representations of Eastern cultures and to their entanglement with imperial discourse. Over the past four decades, however, a substantial body of scholarship – represented, *inter alia*, by critics such as Lisa Lowe (1991), Nigel Leask (1992), Mohammed Sharafuddin (1994), Kate Teltscher (1995), Robert Irwin (2006), Daniel Martin Varisco (2005), Urs App (2010), Srinivas Aravamudan (2012), and Humberto Garcia (2012) – has significantly reassessed the historical and theoretical premises of the Saidian model. In particular, these scholars have questioned whether an exclusive focus on colonial domination and subordination can fully account for the historical heterogeneity of Orientalist scholarship, pointing instead to instances of genuine intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual reciprocity. Building upon these critical reassessments, the present study examines the specific mechanisms of transmission, reception, and structural affinity that linked classical Persian verse to English Romanticism. Moving beyond exotic ornamentation or opportunistic literary borrowing, I argue that Persian poetry and the mystical worldview of Sufism provided British writers with essential symbols, formal devices, and conceptual frameworks. Far from serving as mere local colour, these elements offered Romantic poetics a transformative paradigm through which to articulate poetry as a vehicle of spiritual discovery and a means of approaching a quasi-mystical experience of poetic creation.

Persia occupied a distinctive and often ambivalent position within the British Orientalist imagination. Unlike territories subject to direct colonial administration or regions viewed primarily through the lens of immediate military hostility, Persia was not incorporated into the British Empire as a direct colonial possession. Instead, as scholars of Romantic Orientalism and British imperial history have noted (e.g. Sharafuddin 1994; Aravamudan 2012; Garcia 2012), it occupied an intermediate space: deeply entangled in imperial and geopolitical interests – most notably through the diplomatic manoeuvres of what was called the "Great Game", the Anglo-Russian rivalry over British India. Nevertheless, Persia retained its nominal political sovereignty and cultural prestige[1].

This geopolitical position generated a complex duality in British attitudes. On the ground, British diplomats, military officers, and travellers – such as Sir John Malcolm (1769-1833) and Sir Gore Ouseley (1770-1844) – frequently evaluated contemporary Qajar society through a pragmatic, administrative lens. Influenced by Europe's rapid industrialisation and perceived monopoly on empirical science, these observers often diagnosed Qajar Persia through secularised metrics of modern progress, attributing what they perceived to be its shortcomings to autocratic governance rather than inherent cultural or racial deficiency. Concurrently, however, British literary culture approached Persia through the prism of its ancient civilisation, recognising it as the heir to a philosophical and poetic tradition fully comparable to the classical heritages of Greece and Rome. This combination of imperial entanglement and continued political autonomy complicates any straightforward identification of Orientalist discourse with direct colonial domination (Ingram 1992; Amanat 2002). While British representations remained shaped by Western perspectives and asymmetrical

[1] For comprehensive analyses of British diplomatic, geopolitical, and military engagements with Qajar Persia within the context of the Great Game and the defence of British India, see Ingram (1992) and Amanat (2002).

power relations, Persia's unique civilisational status allowed its poetic tradition to offer Romantic writers a framework for genuine aesthetic and spiritual engagement.

Indeed, this recognition of Persia's elevated civilisation fostered an intense wave of "Persophilia" across European intellectual culture during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Dabashi 2015: 12-45). Within this atmosphere, Western thinkers held ancient Persian history and classical literature in the highest esteem – an admiration spanning from Montesquieu's satirical deployment of the Persian frame in his *Lettres persanes* (1721), George Lyttelton's *Letters from a Persian in England, to His Friend at Ispahan* (1735), and Voltaire's *Zadig* (1747), to Hegel's monumental declaration in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (2011) that "With this empire we enter for the first time into world history proper" (2011: 304; Tavakoli-Targhi 2001).

It is precisely within this complex field of tension that one can identify some of the most fruitful cultural exchanges between Britain and Persia, particularly in the realm of poetry. Romantic writers discovered in Persian literature forms of imagination, spirituality, and aesthetic expression that resonated deeply with their own concerns. The possibility of such reciprocal encounters found its most influential theoretical expression in Goethe's famous declaration in the *West-östlicher Divan*: "Whoever knows himself and others will recognise this too: Orient and Occident are no longer to be separated" (1981: 121).

1. Romanticism and Sufism

Among the many aspects of Persian culture that attracted European intellectuals during the Romantic period, poetry – deeply infused with Sufi mysticism – occupied a privileged position. Its combination of mystical speculation, lyrical intensity, and philosophical reflection resonated deeply with an age increasingly dissatisfied with Enlightenment rationalism and seeking alternative modes of artistic and spiritual experience. Persian poets such as Hafez, Saʿdi, and Rumi gradually entered the European literary imagination, becoming not merely representatives of an exotic East but authoritative voices in a broader dialogue on poetry, spirituality, and the human condition. For the Romantics, Persia was therefore not merely another region of the "Orient", nor merely a repository of new literary models, but the wellspring of a poetic and philosophical tradition capable of revitalising European literature itself. However, to understand the nature of this Romantic reception, the historical and conceptual relationship between Persian poetry and Sufism requires some clarification[2].

Following the Arab-Islamic conquest of Sasanian Persia (c. 651 AD), Sufism emerged within Islam as an ascetic and mystical movement reacting against the materialism of the early Umayyad caliphate (661-750). Framing the mystic ("*sālik*") as the true possessor of spiritual knowledge, it developed into an inward path centred on the direct, unmediated experience of the Divine. In Persian literary culture, Sufi metaphysics became closely interwoven with classical poetic forms such as the "*ghazal*" (lyric ode) and the "*masnavi*" (rhymed couplet narrative). Through these forms, master poets including Attar, Nezami, Rumi, Jami,

[2] For comprehensive historical and conceptual studies on the development of Sufism within the Islamic tradition and its fundamental role in shaping classical Persian poetic culture, see Schimmel (1975), de Bruijn (1997), and Lewisohn (1999).

and Hafez articulated core mystical doctrines: most notably *fanāʾ* (the annihilation of the earthly ego), "*baqāʾ*" (spiritual subsistence within the Divine), and "*ʿishq*" (transformative, ecstatic love). Within this allegorical system, earthly desire, longing, human romance, and intoxication functioned not merely as earthly experiences but as profound metaphors for spiritual transfiguration and union with the Divine Beloved.

Its appeal to English writers was deeply rooted in striking philosophical and aesthetic affinities. While arising within vastly different historical and religious contexts, both English Romanticism and Persian Sufi poetics emerged as challenges to the dominant intellectual orthodoxies of their respective ages. Just as Sufi thinkers questioned rigid scholasticism in pursuit of an immediate, inward experience of the divine, the Romantics reacted against Neoclassical formal order and Enlightenment rationalism. Crucially, both traditions elevated imagination, intuition, and ecstatic feeling over discursive reason. In both worldviews, verse ceased to be a mere formal exercise, becoming instead the privileged vehicle of visionary experience and spiritual discovery – a medium capable of capturing moments in which individual consciousness transcends ordinary perception to intuit the underlying unity of existence.

2. The Role of Translation

Throughout the history of civilisation, translation has served as one of the principal means of cultural exchange, enabling the circulation of texts, ideas, and aesthetic traditions across linguistic and geographical boundaries. Its mediating role became particularly significant in Britain during the Romantic period, when rapid political, intellectual, and global transformations fostered an unprecedented openness to non-European cultures.

Within this context, the translation of classical Persian poetry played a decisive role in broadening the European intellectual horizon. Far from being a mere linguistic exercise, it introduced new aesthetic models, ethical perspectives, and imaginative forms that reshaped literary sensibility and expanded the imaginative boundaries of European poetry.

This renewed interest in Persia owed much to the work of British Orientalist scholars[3] such as George Sale, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and, above all, Sir William Jones. Their linguistic and philological studies made Persian texts increasingly accessible to English readers and facilitated the circulation of knowledge concerning Persian language[4], history, literature, and culture.

Widely regarded as the founder of Persian studies in the West, Jones (1746-1794) occupies a pivotal place in this intellectual movement. His *Grammar of the Persian Language* (1771), although described as being of more use to poets than to merchants or imperial administrators, introduced readers not only to the structure of the language but also to the richness of

[3] For comprehensive studies on the emergence of Orientalism as a scholarly and cultural phenomenon, see Arberry (1943), Schwab (1984), Ahmad (1992), Haddad (2002), Irwin (2006), and App (2010).

[4] Retaining its Indo-European structure while adopting the Arabic alphabet and vocabulary, Early New Persian developed into a major transregional *lingua franca* across the early modern Persianate world, serving as a language of administration, diplomacy, and high literary culture across the Safavid, Ottoman, and Mughal spheres. For the linguistic development of New Persian and its Arabic elements, see Paul (2000) and Perry (2002); for the role of Persian as a transregional lingua franca, see Green (2019).

Persian poetry through numerous translated excerpts and literary quotations. Furthermore, Jones's comparative linguistic work helped situate Persian, alongside Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin, within a broader Indo-European framework[5]. This philological reclassification contributed to a growing European recognition of Persian as historically related to classical languages central to European heritage, encouraging new forms of comparative linguistic and literary inquiry and complicating the perception of Persian as an entirely external or unintelligible "Oriental" tongue.

More broadly, Jones was instrumental in directing English attention towards Persian, Arabic, and Indian literary traditions. His influence extended well beyond scholarship: Robert Southey and Thomas Moore drew extensively upon his translations and essays (Majeed 1992: 47-86; 87-122), echoes of his work have been identified across the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Alfred Tennyson (Yohannan 1942), and Lord Byron was thoroughly familiar with several of his writings (Meester 1915; Sharafuddin 1994; Javadi 2005)[6]. Equally important, Jones encouraged the translation of many Oriental works that he himself had been unable to publish, thereby stimulating a sustained interest in Eastern literatures throughout the nineteenth century.

Against this background, Persian poetic forms became increasingly accessible to British readers, largely through translation. Jones's "A Persian Song of Hafiz", published in his *Grammar of the Persian Language* (1771), offered an influential European demonstration of the *ghazal* – a classical lyric form composed of autonomous couplets, characterised by thematic fluidity and a deliberate ambiguity in which sensual and Sufi mystical meanings coexist. Rather than adhering to Aristotelian narrative linearity, the *ghazal*'s associative, non-sequential architecture offered British readers a poetic model strikingly different from conventional Neoclassical structures[7]. This non-linear design contributed significantly to the growing Romantic interest in Persian verse, offering an imaginative alternative capable – in Thomas Percy's words – of rekindling "our cold European imaginations" (1764: xxxii-xxxiii).

Jones's broader ambition, however, was not simply to introduce British readers to the spiritual dimension of Persian poetry[8], but to demonstrate literary and historical interconnectedness. In his *Poems, Consisting Chiefly of Translations from the Asiatick Languages* (1772), he repeatedly drew parallels between Persian, Turkish, Arabic, and Indian poetry and the principal traditions of European literature, especially Italian poetry. Jones argued that the

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[5] On Jones's identification of Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Gothic, Celtic, and Old Persian as belonging to a common linguistic family, see his "Third Anniversary Discourse" (1788); for its historical significance in the emergence of Indo-European philology and comparative linguistics, see Trautmann (1997).

[6] A six-volume collective edition of Jones's works was published in 1799, followed by two supplementary volumes in 1801 and an official biography by Lord Teignmouth in 1804. His complete writings were later reissued in a thirteen-volume edition in 1807: see Cannon (1979; 1990).

[7] Jones's translation choice of rendering Hafez's metaphor of structured verses as "orient pearls at random strung" (1772: 63) deliberately emphasised spontaneity and "artless ease". This interpretive choice helped align classical Persian lyricism with emerging pre-Romantic and Romantic aesthetic values. For Arberry's classic critique of Jones's translation strategies, see Arberry (1946).

[8] In his influential essay "On the Mystical Poetry of the Persians and Hindus" (2013), Jones examined Sufi symbolism with remarkable philological insight and genuine intellectual empathy.

imagery and poetic conventions of Petrarch's sonnets displayed remarkable affinities with Persian lyric poetry, even suggesting that certain poetic forms may have reached Europe through Arabic cultural mediation. As he asserted, this offered "a proof that the Eastern imagery is not so different from the European as we are apt to imagine" (Jones 1772: 182).

The comparative study of folklore, epic poetry, and mythology that developed in the wake of Jones's works significantly reinforced his integrative vision. Nineteenth-century comparative scholarship – spearheaded by figures such as Johann Gottfried von Herder, Jacob Grimm, and Friedrich Max Müller – increasingly identified striking correspondences among the myths, narrative structures, poetic motifs, and symbolic patterns of diverse civilisations, suggesting that the poetic imagination ultimately transcended national, religious, and linguistic boundaries (Schwab 1984; Marchand 2009)[9].

Such discoveries encouraged the emergence of a genuinely comparative vision of literature that ultimately culminated in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's concept of "*Weltliteratur*". Far from an abstract theoretical construct, Goethe's formulation of world literature emerged directly from his intense engagement with classical Persian poetry – specifically catalysed by Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall's 1812–1813 landmark translation of Hafez's *Divān*[10]. This intellectual and creative encounter inspired Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan* (1819), an extraordinary poetic project in which he famously declared that East and West could no longer be separated, embodying *Weltliteratur* as a dynamic space of reciprocal aesthetic dialogue and mutual renewal.

Rather than a mere canon of global masterpieces, *Weltliteratur* was conceived as a dynamic space of cross-cultural resonance. As Jones had anticipated, this idea was grounded in the conviction that literary traditions do not develop in isolation but through continuous dialogue, exchange, and mutual enrichment. Cross-cultural engagement, therefore, was not a form of appropriation, but a process of dialogue through which literatures could renew themselves while preserving their distinct identities – an ambitious attempt to imagine a genuinely reciprocal literary dialogue between East and West, one grounded in mutual recognition and appreciation.

This shift represented more than a simple enlargement of the literary canon. It challenged the idea of Europe as a self-contained cultural system by suggesting that defining features of European literature had emerged through long processes of intercultural transmission. Rather than tracing European literature exclusively to a Greco-Roman genealogy, nineteenth-century comparative scholarship increasingly emphasised the interconnectedness of civilisations and the circulation of literary forms across cultures.

Within this broader perspective, Persia gradually ceased to be perceived merely as

[9] On the nineteenth-century emergence of comparative mythology, philology, and folklore studies, as well as their role in constructing cross-cultural frameworks of human imagination, see Müller (1856), Schwab (1984: 11-32), and Marchand (2009).

[10] Goethe conceptualised this engagement with Hafez as an intellectual "*hijra*" – a deliberate spiritual migration away from the political turmoil and rigid Neoclassical constraints of contemporary Europe towards the poetic sanctuaries of the East. On the decisive impact of Hammer-Purgstall's translation on Goethe's poetics and the genesis of the *West-östlicher Divan*, see Mommsen (2014); for the intrinsic relationship between Goethe's Oriental studies and his formulation of *Weltliteratur*, see Birus (2000) and Albrecht (2005).

a distant or exotic geographical entity. Between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the growing availability of Persian texts, translations, and linguistic scholarship contributed to a significant shift in European intellectual culture[11]. Rather than being approached solely through antiquarian, theological, or decorative frameworks, Persian literature increasingly entered comparative literary, philosophical, and aesthetic debates, allowing Persia to be understood as a more substantial historical interlocutor within European thought (Javadi 2005; Dabashi 2015).

3. Layla and Majnun

The introduction of Persian literature into the British Romantic consciousness, as we have seen, was primarily initiated by the pioneering translations and essays of Jones. His landmark translation of Hafez's poetry captivated the English reading public, inspiring a generation of writers to look eastward. While this initial wave of Orientalist scholarship laid the textual foundation across late-eighteenth-century literary culture, it was among the second-generation Romantic poets that Persian forms underwent their most profound aesthetic and philosophical internalisation.

From a methodological perspective, however, the nature of this engagement varies significantly among individual poets. In the cases of Lord Byron and Shelley, engagement with Persian and Orientalist literature is extensively documented through their journals, letters, reading lists, and book orders (Sharafuddin 1994; Javadi 2005)[12]. Byron's familiarity with Persian literature is attested by his readings of Ferdowsi, Sa'di, and Hafez, alongside works by Jones, Stephen Weston, and George Sale. This scholarly foundation complemented his Grand Tour (1809-1811) and directly shaped his "Turkish Tales", such as *The Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos* (1813). Shelley's documented reception is similarly robust: introduced to Jones at Eton, he requested Jones's collected *Works* in 1812, read Isaac D'Israeli's *Mejnoun and Leila* alongside Mary Shelley, and studied Oriental materials throughout his adult life. This documented reception provides a firmer basis for examining possible connections between Persian mystical motifs and poems such as *The Indian Serenade* and *Alastor*. By contrast, in John Keats's case, there is no comparable evidence of direct reading of Persian or Arabic texts, even though his active participation in Leigh Hunt's literary circle and immersion in London's vibrant Romantic print culture ensured his exposure to the era's widespread "Persian poetry fad". Any critical parallel between Keatsian poetics and Sufi concepts must therefore be understood primarily in terms of broader conceptual and structural affinities rather than documented textual influence.

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[11] This shift marked a departure from earlier eighteenth-century and Neoclassical attitudes, which often reduced Persian culture either to static historical models or to ornamental exotica. With the philological and literary advances of the late Enlightenment and Romanticism, Persian texts were no longer kept at a defensive distance as mere Islamic oddities, but were increasingly recognised for their distinct philosophical and aesthetic integrity. On the evolution of Western perceptions of Persian literature from antiquarian curiosity to active cultural engagement, see Javadi (2005: 45-82) and Dabashi (2015: 12-38).

[12] For detailed documentation of Byron's Oriental reading lists – including his Cambridge studies of Weston (1805) and Sale (1734) – see Sharafuddin (1994: 215-220). On Shelley's book orders, his study of Jones's essay "On the Mystical Poetry of the Persians and Hindus", and his reading of D'Israeli (1797) with Mary Shelley, see White (1940: I, 205-212) and Oueijan (2023: 45-58).

Moving far beyond the exoticised local colour of their predecessors, these younger Romantics repurposed the structural mechanics, mystical metaphysics, and psychological archetypes of Persian verse to dismantle Neoclassical rationalism, confront the anxieties of modern Western subjectivity, and ultimately convert the lover's quest for the Divine Beloved into a modern Western odyssey towards Beauty, Imagination, and Art.

As a primary case study, I focus on *Layla and Majnun* by the Persian poet Nezami Ganjavi (1141-1209), widely considered one of the masterpieces of classical Persian literature. The legend itself originated in seventh-century Arabia as a cycle of Bedouin oral anecdotes before being codified in the tenth century by Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani in his *Kitab al-Aghani*. In the late twelfth century, Nezami radically transformed these fragmented narrative materials into a unified Persian epic romance, infusing the tragic story of human passion with a profound Sufi allegorical and mystical dimension[13].

The story reached British readers through Isaac D'Israeli's *Mejnoun and Leila* (1797), in which Nezami was celebrated as "one of the sublimest of the Persian poets" (1797: 98). Rather than a literal translation of Nezami's text, D'Israeli's version represents a complex act of cultural mediation and creative adaptation. Drawing partly on Denis-Dominique Cardonne's 1778 French translation and on an illuminated Persian manuscript of Nezami preserved in the library of his friend Francis Douce, D'Israeli also incorporated fragments from other Persian poets, including Jami and Sa'di, alongside classical motifs such as the rose and the nightingale ("*gul u bulbul*") (Ogden 1969; Javadi 2005)[14]. Describing the story as "as popular in the East as the loves of Abelard and Heloïsa, or those of Petrarch and Laura are in the West" (D'Israeli 1797: xxiii) – and explicitly subtitling his work *The Arabian Petrarch and Laura* – D'Israeli provided British Romantics with a crucial textual bridge to Persian mystical romance.

The narrative recounts the tragic love between Kais and Layla, whose union is thwarted by their respective families. Rejected by Layla's parents, Kais gradually descends into madness, earning the epithet *Majnun* – a passive participle denoting one "possessed by *jinn*" and, by extension, driven mad by love (Saccone 2018: 755-756)[15]. Cast out of social order, he wanders through the desert, befriended only by wild animals while composing verses for his absent beloved.

Majnun's desert exile draws directly upon an older Arabic poetic tradition in which desolate landscapes, wandering, ruin-contemplation, and solitary mourning form a foundational imaginative vocabulary. These motifs, central to the pre-Islamic odes later compiled as the *Mo'allaqāt*, were subsequently transformed within Persian mystical romance into an architectural foundation of spiritual self-loss and solitude. Jones's landmark English

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[13] On the historical evolution of the Majnun narrative from early Arabic Bedouin poetry to Nezami's Persian allegorical epic, see Calasso (1983) and Davis (2021).

[14] For detailed textual reconstructions of Isaac D'Israeli's sources – including his reliance on Cardonne (1778), Francis Douce's Persian manuscript, and various excerpts from Jones's translations – see Ogden (1969: 35-48) and Javadi (2005: 85-91).

[15] As Carlo Saccone clarifies, Majnun is doubled in his condition: he is simultaneously possessed by the "spirit" (*jinn*) of absolute love and perceived as afflicted by literal insanity in the eyes of his tribe (2018: 755-756).

translation of the *Mo'allaqāt* (1782) made this rugged, emotionally charged poetic landscape directly accessible to British readers, offering Romantic writers a vivid aesthetic of melancholic isolation[16]. Layla is subsequently forced to marry another man and eventually dies consumed by grief. Upon learning of her death, Majnun succumbs to sorrow beside her tomb, uniting the lovers only beyond earthly existence.

Yet the narrative functions as far more than a tragic romance. In Nezami's hands, human love is elevated into a rigorous spiritual discipline, wherein separation serves as the indispensable condition for transcendent realisation. As framed by late-eighteenth-century mediators such as D'Israeli, the legend offered Romantic readers a powerful model of idealised devotion purified through renunciation – one in which the lover's earthly suffering and physical self-loss become the very means of achieving a higher, spiritualised state of unity. True love is thus measured not by physical possession, but by the lover's willingness to surrender the self – a conception deriving directly from Sufi mysticism. Human love functions as the visible manifestation of a deeper longing for the Divine; separation from the earthly beloved mirrors the soul's exile from God, while the beloved's beauty becomes the earthly reflection of divine Beauty itself. Consequently, the poem operates continuously on two interconnected levels: the earthly human narrative and the transcendent mystical allegory.

Jones clearly recognised this allegorical dimension when he observed that the poem was "avowedly allegorical and mysterious", suggesting that Layla ultimately represents "the omnipresent Spirit of God" (2013: 222). Love here expresses not only the agony of separation from the beloved, but also from the Divine. The lover is filled with an intense longing for reunion with God.

The fusion of love and madness marks the narrative's decisive turning point. Majnun's state of being "distracted with passion" serves as the ultimate proof of the authenticity of his devotion. Thwarted in his romantic suit, he becomes entirely possessed by the interior image of his beloved; at that precise moment, earthly desire ("*ʿishq-i majāzī*") is transfigured into a spiritual vocation ("*ʿishq-i ḥaqīqī*"). Detached from social convention, Majnun consecrates his entire being to the contemplation of the idealised Beloved and to the composition of verse. In Nezami's formulation, Majnun's affliction is not a mere clinical insanity, but an ecstatic alienation from worldly illusion:

> Let me quit a world in which I have ceased to be useful: trust me, I am fitted for a hermitage! I care not for the honour of my friends, and am placable to the insult of an enemy. What is a man, alike incapable of friendship or of enmity? – O, thou desert! thou unshadowy waste! to me pleasant is the abode of thy unrelenting rocks (D'Israeli 1797: 115).

Although Majnun is already a poet before his exile, it is this state of passionate madness that elevates his verse, transforming personal suffering into visionary utterance. Poetic

[16] For Jones's seminal translation of the pre-Islamic odes and his preliminary discourse on Arabian poetry, see Jones (1782). On the reception of the *Mo'allaqāt* in British Romanticism, see Sharafuddin (1994: 42-68) and Attar (2014: 15-38).

creation and madness thus emerge in Nezami's romance as complementary expressions of a single, ecstatic condition: as Majnun proclaims in his wilderness solitude: "I quit the FAME that crowns my polished song, and in a desert, strangling glory's voice, I feel the madness and approve the choice. Yet, scorn me not, nor yield a proud relief, There is a majesty in lonely grief" (D'Israeli 1797: 184).

This intrinsic link between madness, poetic inspiration, and social exile reveals a striking structural alignment with English Romantic poetics. Rather than asserting a direct historical inheritance across all Romantic writers, this parallel illuminates a shared conceptual topology: both Nezami's Sufi-infused allegory and Romantic theories of the imagination perceive poetic genius and mental alienation as dual manifestations of an inner estrangement from a utilitarian world. Only when Majnun is cast out of the social order does he fully realise his dual identity as poet and mystic – establishing the archetype of the solitary, alienated visionary that would find such a powerful resonance in the poetic landscapes of Shelley, Byron, and Keats.

4. The Nightingale and the Rose: Symbol, Reception, and Aesthetic Affinity

Majnun's transformation into the archetypal lover-poet finds its most iconic symbolic expression in the celebrated Persian image of the nightingale ("*bulbul*") and the rose ("*gul*"). Within the Sufi mystical tradition, as elucidated in foundational texts such as Farid al-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* (1177), the rose represents the inaccessible beauty, perfection, and splendour of the Divine Beloved, while the nightingale embodies the soul of the lover-mystic consumed by an insatiable longing for union (1984; Bertel's 1965: 42-58)[17]. At the same time, because the nightingale pours forth its continuous lament in praise of the rose, it serves within classical Persian poetics as the primary emblem of the poet. As Isaac D'Israeli observed in his commentary on Nezami, "Kais is indeed a nightingale, and Leila his Rose" (1797: 40).

According to this allegorical tradition, the nightingale presses its breast against a thorn to remain awake throughout the night, singing until it bleeds and faints. The image fuses love, bodily suffering, and poetic creation into a single, indivisible trope. D'Israeli captured this idea when he described the poet as a nightingale whose song grows sweeter in proportion to its agony:

> The more mellifluous his pathetic song, the more his bosom leant on the piercing thorns: ah! he sings but to bleed, he leans but to faint; the nightingale dies on the Rose in aromatic pain […] Believe me, my friends, the poet, the tender poet, is like the rich perfume, which, the more it is crushed, the more deliciously yields its odours (1797: 40).

Historically, this trope proved remarkably durable in its transmission to European literature. First introduced directly into English verse through Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's translations of Ottoman love poetry during her embassy to Constantinople (1716-1718; published 1763), the motif of the rose and the nightingale circulated widely across

[17] For comprehensive critical analyses of the mystical allegory of the *bulbul* and *gul* in classical Persian literature, see Attar (1984; 2003) and Bertel's (1965: 42-58; 2021).

eighteenth-century Orientalist writing before becoming one of the defining figurative devices of British Romanticism (Javadi 2005: 112-125; Oueijan 1996; 1999)[18]. The documented reception of this emblem appears prominently in works explicitly set within Eastern milieus, such as Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh* (1817)[19] and Lord Byron's Oriental tales, most notably *The Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos* (1813).

The success of the symbol was hardly accidental. Beyond its documented adoption as a decorative or localising motif, the *bulbul/gul* trope resonated with Romantic aesthetics owing to a profound structural and symbolic affinity. The Persian nightingale coalesced into a core image in the ideals of Romantic poetics: the identification of poetry with intense emotional effusion, the view of artistic creation as inseparable from suffering, and the belief that transcendent beauty requires a form of self-annihilation (*fanāʾ*). In this broader comparative sense, the nightingale functioned not merely as an imported Oriental motif, but as a symbolic mirror for the Romantic re-definition of the poetic vocation itself – a resonance vividly discernible in Samuel T. Coleridge's "The Nightingale" and Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale".

Like the nightingale, the lover undergoes a form of symbolic death. The culmination of *Layla and Majnun* is therefore not physical demise but self-annihilation (*fanāʾ*), wherein the individual ego must be relinquished before the soul can attain union with the Beloved. Love thus operates as a spiritual discipline through which the self is gradually emptied of its worldly attachments until it is transformed into participation in the divine. Majnun's death beside Layla's tomb does not signify despair but spiritual completion: it fulfils a process of renunciation that had begun long before his earthly life came to an end. Physical death merely seals an inner transfiguration already accomplished through love.

From this perspective, suffering acquires a positive value. The lover's path is marked by separation, longing, and pain, yet these trials become the necessary stages of spiritual ascent. What appears as loss is revealed as ultimate transcendence, for the negation of earthly desire opens the way to a more perfect form of devotion. The extinction of the individual self makes possible union with the Eternal Beloved, who, in Sufi thought, is not a distant deity but a living presence accessible through contemplation, love, and absolute self-surrender.

This philosophical paradigm offers a compelling comparative framework for reading Shelley's poetics. In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley famously defines Love as "a going out of our nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own" (1840: 17). This conception of radical self-transcendence invites a direct parallel with the Sufi doctrine of *fanāʾ*, insofar as both models demand a movement beyond the isolated, egocentric self towards participation in a higher, universal reality. In both systems, self-renunciation is not viewed as a tragic defeat, but as the essential prerequisite for imaginative and spiritual fulfilment.

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[18] Lady Mary Wortley Montagu included her translation of a Turkish *ghazal* employing the nightingale and rose motif in her *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1994: 76-77). On the historical transmission of this translation and its impact on eighteenth-century English poetry, see Javadi (2005: 112-125).

[19] Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh* (1817), a frame narrative centred on a Mughal princess travelling from Delhi to Kashmir, offers a significant example of the wider Romantic fascination with Persian and Oriental themes. Byron explicitly encouraged Moore's project in a letter dated 28 August 1813, famously urging him to "stick to the East" (1974: III, 101).

On a broader comparative level, Nezami's treatment of love as a transformative discipline also invites parallels with medieval European traditions of spiritualised love, most notably Dante Alighieri's representation of Beatrice. In both *Layla and Majnun* and the *Commedia*, human affection exceeds physical possession to become a transformative movement of spiritual ascent, wherein the earthly beloved acts as a crucial mediator between earthly beauty and divine reality. Dante's celebrated line, "Tu m'hai di servo tratto a libertate" (1966-1967: *Paradiso* XXXI, 85), offers a remarkably concise formulation of this shared dynamic, in which the lover's surrender of earthly desire converts suffering into revelation and leads the soul from worldly bondage towards mystical transcendence.

This shared topology of self-surrender offers a revealing perspective for examining Shelley's engagement with Oriental motifs. In "The Indian Serenade", Shelley transforms what appears to be a conventional love lyric into an intense poetic exploration of self-dissolution that closely mirrors the *gul u bulbul* trope. Access to this Persian imagery was facilitated for Shelley through the foundational translations and scholarly commentaries of Jones and Sir William Ouseley[20]. In the poem's second stanza, the speaker explicitly evokes this classical emblem:

> The nightingale's complaint,
> It dies upon her heart –
> As I must on thine (Shelley 1914: 575, ll. 13-15).

Rather than employing the dying nightingale as a mere ornamental hyperbole, Shelley aligns the speaker with the classical Persian poet-lover, whose unyielding devotion to the Beloved demands absolute self-surrender rather than physical possession. This allegorical foundation dictates the lyric's dramatic climax: echoing the structural dynamics of the classical Persian *ghazal* – where sensory intoxication culminates in the annihilation of the ego – the speaker undergoes a state of total physical collapse, exclaiming: "Oh lift me from the grass! / I die! I faint! I fail!" (Shelley 1914: 575, ll. 17-19). Sensual longing and spiritual *fanāʾ* here converge, rendering physical dissolution the ultimate expression of imaginative and devotional union.

This unconditional yielding mimics spiritual ecstasy, wherein the ego is stripped of self-will to be consumed by sacred passion. While *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude* (1816) may be read, in comparative terms, through a broader dialectic between *fanāʾ* (self-annihilation) and *baqāʾ* (spiritual persistence), "The Indian Serenade" distils this imagery into a concise, highly musical drama of emotional abandonment. By imploring to be pressed close to the beloved's heart "where it will break at last" (Shelley 1914: 575, l. 23), the speaker frames erotic longing as a sacrificial rite, aligning emotional dissolution with the surrender of the ego.

In *Alastor*, Shelley's narrative invites a compelling comparison with the symbolic archi-

[20] On Shelley's familiarity with Sir William Ouseley's *Persian Miscellanies* (1795) and the *Oriental Collections* (1797-1800), as well as his adaptation of the Persian "*radif*" and *ghazal* structures, see Javadi (2005: 128-135) and Oueijan (2023: 52-61).

tecture of *Layla and Majnun*, offering a striking parallel for a secularised quest for ideal Beauty. Central to this structural affinity is the representation of the desert landscape, which functions not merely as a setting but as a psychological and spiritual arena for self-annihilation. Just as D'Israeli depicts Mejnoun climbing rugged rocks and treading briny sands until his withered frame inhabits a solitary wilderness (1797: 105-110), Shelley's Poet abandons home to wander through the desolate, "stony jaws" of Arabia, Persia, and Carmania. The Poet's retreat into the wilderness mirrors Majnun's exile, transforming physical solitude into an instrument of spiritual purification wherein the individual ego is systematically extinguished. In both texts, the desolate terrain serves as an ascetic condition, purging the protagonist of earthly attachments and establishing a contemplative isolation from human society.

Furthermore, the Poet's visionary encounter with the "veiled maid" may be read alongside late-eighteenth-century descriptions of Sufi ecstatic practice. In D'Israeli's text, Mejnoun assumes the guise of a wandering dervish, playing the reed-flute ("*ney*") until, overwhelmed by pain and sacred ecstasy, he collapses in a death-like trance (1797: 115-120). Shelley presents a remarkably similar dramatic sequence during the Poet's dream vision (1914: 18-19, ll. 149-191): as the veiled maiden's voice echoes the mournful strains of a musical instrument, the Poet, swept by ecstatic longing, reaches out to merge into her "dissolving arms" (1914: 19, l. 187), falling into a trance that functions as the poetic equivalent of emotional exhaustion and physical self-loss.

Finally, Shelley's conclusion presents a striking thematic and textual convergence with D'Israeli's description of Mejnoun's death. D'Israeli portrays Mejnoun's demise as a quiet, solemn fading – staggering across the desert until his final breath vanishes into the vast silence (1797: 162-165). Shelley evokes an analogous atmosphere in the Poet's final moments, depicting him stepping with fragile feet into a secluded wilderness to surrender his breath without violent struggle (1914: 28-29, ll. 645-671). In both narratives, death emerges as the inevitable culmination of an internal consumption: an erasure of the bodily self, necessitated by the impossibility of sustaining absolute, transcendent union within the material world (Oueijan 2023: 65-78)[21].

5. Art as Religion

The Romantic engagement with *Layla and Majnun* and Persian poetry did not end with its mystical interpretation. While eighteenth-century readers primarily recognised the Sufi narrative of the soul's longing for the Divine, second-generation Romantics reinterpreted the figure of the lover-poet within an increasingly secularised aesthetic framework. In this transformation, the Sufi concept of *fanāʾ* – the annihilation of the ego in the Divine – was transposed from a strictly theological domain into the realm of poetic creation, where artistic experience itself assumed the sacred function of spiritual transcendence.

This conceptual shift was anchored in the eighteenth-century emergence of aesthetics as an autonomous philosophical discipline. When Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten coined the term "*aesthetica*" in his *Meditationes philosophicae* (1735: §116) and later codified it in his

[21] For comparative analyses exploring the structural and thematic parallels between Shelley's *Alastor* and classical Persian allegorical romances, see Oueijan (2023: 119-122) and Javadi (2005: 135-142).

Aesthetica (1750-1758), his objective was to grant sensible knowledge an independent epistemological dignity alongside rational logic. Defining aesthetics as the science of sensitive cognition ("*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*") and beauty as the perfection of sensible knowledge, Baumgarten achieved a revolutionary breakthrough: sensibility (*"aisthesis"*) ceased to be viewed as a confused step towards rational truth, becoming recognised instead as a legitimate bearer of irreducible insight (1750: §1; Guyer 2014)[22].

Though Baumgarten did not claim that art granted access to the Absolute, his foundational move opened an intellectual space that Immanuel Kant reconfigured in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790) by attributing to aesthetic judgment a mediating function between nature and freedom, sensible reality and moral law. The post-Kantian Idealists brought this trajectory to its speculative climax. In his *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* (1800), Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling posited the work of art not merely as an object of taste, but as the primary organ of philosophy – the infinite manifestation in finite form through which the underlying identity of spirit and nature is revealed (1800: 287-307; Beiser 2002)[23].

In this intellectual climate, the Romantic poet inherited a role formerly reserved for the mystic. As M. H. Abrams famously argued, Romanticism performed a systematic "secularisation of inherited theological ideas", transforming divine illumination into imaginative epiphany (1971: 12-16). Jacques Barzun similarly observed:

> Art, then, was the gateway to the realm of spirit for all those over whom the old religions had lost their hold. Most Romantic artists needed nothing higher. Art was sufficient and supreme. For a Goethe or a Berlioz, nature and art equally embodied the divine […] The genius […] was nature's mouthpiece, and the products of his art were an enlargement of nature, both alike deserving adoration (1974: 30).

Within this secularised framework, classic Sufi tropes underwent a profound functional reinterpretation. A striking example is the ancient Persian allegory of the moth and the candle ("*parvānah u sham'*"), immortalised in classical texts such as Farid al-Din Attar's *Mantiq al-Tayr* and the *ghazals* of Hafez and Rumi to illustrate the soul's joyful self-immolation in the flame of Divine Glory (Schimmel 1975; Lewisohn 1999)[24]. In Shelley's "To –" ("One word is too often profaned"), this traditional mystical emblem is reconfigured into a secularised aspiration towards ideal love and poetic beauty:

> The desire of the moth for the star,
> Of the night for the morrow,
> The devotion to something afar
> From the sphere of our sorrow (1914: 639, ll. 13-16).

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[22] On Baumgarten's pioneering formulation of aesthetics and its emancipation from Cartesian logic, see Guyer (2014: 318-340).

[23] On the post-Kantian transformation of aesthetic judgment into a supreme philosophical instrument for intuiting the Absolute, see Schelling (1800), and Beiser (2002).

[24] For the historical origins and mystical metaphysics of the moth-and-candle allegory in Persian Sufi poetry, see Attar (1984: 206-210), Schimmel (1975: 70, 142-145), and Lewisohn (1999: II, 115-130).

By substituting the terrestrial candle – which consumes the lover in an immediate flash of fire – with a distant star, Shelley evokes the *parvāneh* archetype, decoupling *fanā'* from literal physical death. The moth's desire becomes a continuous, non-possessive contemplation of an unearthly, transcendent Ideal. Rather than a mere tragic dissolution, this longing transforms into a manifesto of imaginative resistance, wherein the heroic soul refuses to yield to cold, calculating reason, choosing instead to refine and hollow out the ego through the voluntary renunciation of physical possession.

This secularisation of *fanā'* finds its ultimate ontological and epistemological culmination in Keats. Long before T. S. Eliot described artistic creation as "a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (1920: 53), Keats had formulated a strikingly similar conception in his theory of "*negative capability*". In his letter to Richard Woodhouse (27 October 1818), Keats delineated the true "poetical Character" – in opposition to the Wordsworthian "egotistical sublime" – asserting that "it has no self – it is everything and nothing – It has no character... it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto" (1958: I, 387). This "chameleon poet" relinquishes a sovereign, bounded subjectivity to continually inhabit other forms, whether an Iago, an Imogen, or a sparrow pecking in the gravel. The artist must relinquish a fixed sense of self, suspend self-consciousness, and become fully receptive to the reality contemplated.

This radical empathy may be compared with the opening allegory of Jalal al-Din Rumi's *Masnavi* (1925-1940): the song of the reed flute (*ney*). Rumi's *ney* is a hollow vessel, severed from its native reedbed and emptied of its physical substance. It possesses no voice of its own; it is the breath of the flute-player – the Divine Beloved – passing through its empty chambers that produces the music of nostalgic separation. Keats's chameleon poet may be compared to this hollow reed. To articulate the *gusto* of existence, the artist must undergo an aesthetic "*kenosis*", purging the self of the egotistical sublime so that the sensations of the world can resonate through him like breath.

Keats made this self-emptying epistemologically explicit through his theory of negative capability, defined in December 1817 as the capacity of "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (1958: I, 193). This refusal to force a rational closure onto the absolute directly mirrors the classical Sufi critique of the logical mind ("*'aql*"), which thinkers like Hafez deemed structurally incapable of penetrating the enigma of existence. By cultivating what Keats called "diligent indolence" in a letter to J. H. Reynolds of 19 February 1818 (1958: I, 231), or what William Wordsworth termed "wise passiveness" (1992: 103), the poetic mind ceases to be an aggressive seeker and becomes a thoroughfare for all thoughts. This state of intellectual receptivity represents the secular equivalent of the Sufi station of "*faqr*" (spiritual poverty): by relinquishing intellectual ownership and rational categorisation, the poet's mind becomes an open, hollowed-out space capable of receiving the unmediated revelation of universal Beauty and Truth.

This aesthetic *fanā'* reaches its poetic zenith in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale". The nightingale (*bulbul*) – the classic Sufi symbol of the soul's melancholic longing for the unattainable rose (*gul*) – lures the poet to escape the physical world through the "viewless wings of Poesy" (1977: 347, l. 33). Seeking a complete sensory fusion with the bird's song, the poet reaches the brink of symbolic death ("To cease upon the midnight with no pain")

(Keats 1977: 347, l. 56). Yet, because this union is achieved through the ephemeral power of the human imagination rather than divine grace, the flight abruptly terminates, leaving the poet in a state of productive melancholia: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music: – Do I wake or sleep?" (Keats 1977: 348, ll. 79-80).

6. Conclusion

The encounter between classical Persian poetry and English Romanticism represents one of the most intellectually fertile cross-cultural dialogues in modern literary history. As this study has demonstrated, this engagement operated across two distinct yet complementary dimensions: documented historical reception and comparative structural affinity. Through the philological and translation labours of Jones, Isaac D'Israeli, and their contemporaries, Persian poetic forms such as the *ghazal* and allegorical narratives such as Nezami's *Layla and Majnun* entered the British literary imagination, offering concrete models of non-linear composition, emotional fluidity, and symbolic richness.

The comparisons developed in this essay suggest that the Romantic encounter with Persian verse involved far more than the adoption of exotic ornamentation or decorative local colour. Through translation, documented reception, and broader conceptual affinities, ideas associated with Sufi self-annihilation (*fanā'*) offered a productive framework for rethinking poetic identity, transcendence, and the relationship between the self and the imagination. Via the philosophical bridge of late eighteenth-century aesthetics, the mystical journey towards union with the Divine was transfigured into an aesthetic quest for beauty, art, and imaginative insight – preserving the architectural structure of mystical transcendence while establishing the self-emptying artist as its ultimate vessel.

In this light, the encounter between Persian poetry and English Romanticism stands as a compelling example of the cross-cultural literary exchange later conceptualised in Goethe's vision of *Weltliteratur* (1827). Rather than representing a passive inheritance or an act of unilateral appropriation, this dialogue demonstrates a dynamic process wherein inherited poetic forms and mystical concepts were reinterpreted, transformed, and integrated into a new language of poetic modernity.

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