

“A Noose of Light”

A Brief Biography of J.T.P. de Bruijn

Awake! for Morning in the Bowl of Night
Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight:
And Lo! the Hunter of the East has caught
The Sultan's Turret in a Noose of Light.

(*Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyam*, Translated by
Edward FitzGerald, 1st edition 1859)

Introduction

This book consists of a collection of articles on various aspects of Persian culture written by my mentor, J.T.P. de Bruijn. Readers will soon see why, towards the end of 1989, I became captivated by his scholarship and stayed in Leiden as his student. I first became acquainted with his work as a student of English language and literature at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. I spent most of my time on the library's tenth floor, reading books on medieval English literature, but from time to time I consulted a small row of books, about one and half metres long, devoted to Persian culture. In one of these I found the article on *qalamkār* (“the craft of woodblock-printing on cotton tablecloths”) by Hans de Bruijn.¹ I was so impressed that I decided to meet the author at Leiden University. I called the secretary, Mrs Van Die, and made an appointment for a Friday afternoon. De Bruijn's office was somewhat dim, with all the light coming from the sun outside. He welcomed me with a smile and a curious, reserved, but amicable look. In those days the majority of Iranians in the Netherlands were refugees and politically involved. Later I learned that he had thought I was one of the politically engaged refugees who wanted to make him participate in a faction of Iranian politics.

He invited me to sit on a chair around a square table occupying half the small room. I did not know whether to look politely at him, as it is a Dutch

custom to look one's interlocutor in the eyes, or at the Persian books on the shelves, or at a large quantity of disorganised papers with Persian texts lying on the table. A half-page text emerging from a Persian typewriter on his desk caught my eye. I had never seen Persian texts in a Dutch university context. The papers caught my attention because they were Persian poems with Dutch translations. I well remember that there were extracts of Ḥāfiz's (c. 1320–1390) *ghazals*, Muḥammad-Taqī Bahār's (1886–1951) poetry and some poems of Parvīn I'tišāmī (1907–1941) and Furūgh Farrukhzād (1935–1967). In the few seconds before we started to talk, I had gathered so much information that I instinctively knew that I was with a special man and that I wanted to be with him, to know him and to learn from him. The combination of classical and modern poetry was extremely captivating. I was astounded at the translations into Dutch. Can anyone translate Ḥāfiz? Persian speakers usually believe that it is simply impossible to render the ethereal beauty of Persian verse into another language, keeping the melody, wisdom and acumen intact.

His first question was about what I was studying in Amsterdam and whether it was not hard for an Iranian to study English through the notoriously difficult Dutch language. I explained the curriculum system at the Vrije Universiteit and why I wanted to complete my studies in Amsterdam as I was captivated by Old English and Middle English poetry. I asked whether it would be possible to start my second period of study at Leiden University. He then asked whether I liked classical or modern Persian poetry. Looking at the translations on the table I hesitated to answer, but after a few seconds of indecision I replied that I liked both, but classical Persian was for me a veritable mine of wisdom and an unexplored universe. He smiled and started a pleasant conversation about the role of poetry in Persian culture. Afterwards he humbly explained the curriculum at Leiden and advised me to register for the next year. The rest is history.

Here I am, after thirty years of enjoying Hans' mentorship, collegiality and friendship, publishing a collection of his articles. I have learned prodigiously from him, intellectually and as a human being. I especially admire his modesty and integrity, which I have rarely seen in today's academia, and I hope to follow his footsteps at least in this respect.

Biography

Johannes Thomas Pieter de Bruijn was born on 12 July 1931 in Leiden, the Netherlands. He studied Arabic and Islam with scholars such as J.H. Kramers, Joseph Schacht and Seeger A. Bonebakker; and Persian and Turkish with Karl E.O. Jahn, all at Leiden University. From 1954 to 1960 he collaborated in the *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane* project, which was published under the auspices of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) in Amsterdam. He also contributed to the editing of the English version of Jan Rypka's *History of Iranian Literature*, which was published in Dordrecht in 1968. From 1960 to 1963 he was curator of the Middle Eastern Department at the Dutch National Museum of Ethnology. In 1964 he started his career at Leiden University. In 1988, he took the extraordinary chair of Persian financed by the Eastern Institute, which continued from 1991 as an ordinary chair. During this time he was a Board member of a wide range of international academic bodies such as the Societas Iranologica Europea, the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* and *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. After his retirement in 1995, he was entirely engaged with the prestigious project, *The History of Persian Literature* in 20 volumes, working together with Dr. Ehsan Yarshater. He edited the first volume of this literary history to set an example for the remainder of the series, and has contributed several chapters to the other volumes, on the history of Persian ghazals, Persian mystical and didactic poetry, and the development of Persian panegyric poetry for medieval courts and courtiers.²

In addition to his scholarly work in English, De Bruijn has published several articles and translations on classical and modern Persian literature in Dutch. His translation of Sa'dī's *Gulistān* (*The Rose Garden*) is the first Dutch translation based on the original Persian text. Sa'dī was a favourite of Dutch authors from the seventeenth century, but never before has a translation appeared that also imitates Sa'dī's rhythmic and rhyming style.³ He also published an anthology of Persian poetry from the tenth century to the modern period under the title of *Een karavaan uit Perzië* (“A Caravan From Persia”). This is certainly a unique collection, which gives examples of various poetic forms and genres of a millennium of Persian poetry in a pleasing poetic style, and with annotations. It starts in the ninth century, with poets such as Hanzala Bādqaysī, and ends with a *ghazal* from Furūgh Farrukhād. In addition, I have had the honour to translate with Professor De Bruijn several collections of modern poetry by eminent poets such as Aḥmad Shāmlū,

Nādir Nādirpūr and Hūshang Ibtihāj, and collaborated in the collection of works by Hūshang Gulshīri.

Another field of research that De Bruijn has contributed to is Khayyam Studies. He published a translation of Khayyam's quatrains in Dutch under the title *De ware zin heeft niemand nog verstaan*. Unfortunately almost all of the essays he has written on Khayyam are in Dutch, covering various aspects of the translation history of 'Umar Khayyam in Dutch literature. Being an active member of the Dutch Omar Khayyam Society, he wrote articles on the sources used by Dutch poets such as L.H. Leopold (1865–1925) and P.C. Boutens (1870–1943).⁴

In 1995, to celebrate De Bruijn as a scholar, a conference was convened by Professor Johan ter Haar. In 2001, the journal *Persica* published a *festschrift* to which thirteen scholars contributed. For his eightieth birthday, in 2011, I organised a two-day conference entitled *Islam and Muslims in Dutch Art and Literature* at the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) in Amsterdam, during which 24 papers were presented on various aspects of Oriental Studies.⁵ For his eighty-sixth birthday, Petra de Bruijn and I published a collection of his poetry entitled *Zondagswerk* or *Sunday Work*. The private publisher, Jan Keijser, set these poems in Ehrhardt, an old-style serif typeface, and printed 90 copies on Zerkall Bütten paper.⁶ This exceptionally produced volume has been translated into Persian by Koushyar Parsi, and is included in this volume. De Bruijn has also been respected by Iranian people in Iran, as the prestigious Mahmood Afshar prize awarded to him in Tehran in 2006 testifies.⁷ During this event several scholars such as the late Iraj Afshar (1925–2011) and Nasrollah Pourjavady gave lectures on the significance of De Bruijn's scholarship. The most recent celebration of his work was organised in Leiden on 10 November 2017, with the collaboration of *Shahr-i Kitāb*.⁸

De Bruijn as a Haiku Poet

In addition to his scholarly work, De Bruijn is a fine poet, especially in writing haikus, which he has composed since 2002. For the conference entitled *Islam and Muslims* in 2011, Jan Keijser published a small volume consisting of nine haikus as a keepsake.⁹ At the conference dinner, De Bruijn spoke to the late Jos Biegstraaten, the Chairman of the Dutch Omar Khayyam Society, about his haikus. Later Biegstraaten sent pictures of birds he had made to De Bruijn, who wrote a haiku for each picture and returned them. Together, they published two volumes, in 2012 and 2013.¹⁰

De Bruijn's poetry offers a touching depiction of Dutch landscapes, especially birds and seasonal changes, but also the changeable Dutch weather, impressions of the poet's travels in countries such as Turkey, and quatrains about topical issues and other subjects.¹¹ Many are about birds in different seasons. An example is the following haiku:

Drijvend in het wak
denken de vogels misschien
aan warme voeten.¹²

شناور در آب چالهی میان یخ
شاید مرغان می اندیشند
به پاهای گرم

Floating on the ice-hole
Perhaps the birds are thinking
Of warm feet.

He has also written poetry in other forms, especially quatrains, on a wide range of subjects. The following poem is about the Shiite anticipation of the Return of the hidden twelfth Imam, the Mahdī, whom God removed from human sight in 941. According to the Shiites he will return at the end of time to establish universal peace. In eschatological accounts, his return is connected to wars and chaos at the end of the world:

Als morgen toch het zwarte gat ontstaat
Waarin alles – Obama, Poetin en de rest – vergaat,
Denkt ergens nog een vrome Molla een seconde
Dat de Verborgene nu opengaat

If tomorrow the black hole appears
In which everything – Obama, Putin and the rest – disappear,
Somewhere a pious mullah will still think, for one second,
That the Hidden One is now to be revealed

فردا که سیاه چاله سر بر آوزد
آن جا که همه چیزی – او باما، پوتین و باقی – فرو خواهد رفت،
ملایی پرهیزگار به جایی دمی می اندیشد
که پنهان اکنون آشکار خواهد شد.

The Persian medieval masters such as Sa'dī, Ḥāfīz and Rūmī each have a place in De Bruijn's poetry. These poems also reveal the essence of the masters' teachings. The poem at the mausoleum of Rūmī in Konya refers to the rejection of normative Islam, the outward piety of which Rūmī was so

critical. The allusion is to the fire of the sun pointing to Shams (“the Sun”), the wandering dervish who changed Rūmī’s life forever, transforming him from a theologian to a passionate lover:

Toegedekt voor de kilte van dit uur
rust hij temidden van de armen,
verkleumden, die zich komen warmen
aan vonkjes uit zijn smeulend vuur.

به زیرِ بالپوش از سرمای این دم
آرمیده است میان آغوش‌ها،
سرمازده‌گان، که می‌آیند گرما بگیرند
با آذرخشِ آتشِ شعله‌ورش.

Wij anderen, rijk en onnozel, zien alleen
wat bric-à-brac, prullaria van vroomheid;
glazig ogen, schaamteloos verwijd,
kijken niet door de fenomenen heen.

ما دیگران، غنی و بی‌هوده، تنها می‌بینیم
خرده ریز، اشیای بی‌ارزشِ پارسایی؛
چشم‌های شیشه‌ای، کشاده به بی‌شرمی،
از درون پدیده‌ها نمی‌نگرند.

Wrapped up against the chill of this hour
he’s resting among the poor,
the numbed, who come to warm themselves
from the sparks of his smoldering fire.

We others, rich and mindless, only see
Some oddities, the knickknacks of piety;
Glazed eyes, open and shameless,
not looking through the surfaces of things.

Having dedicated his life to Persian culture, we see in his poetry how he is inspired by this poetic tradition. While in his translations he rendered the voices of others splendidly, in his own collection we hear his voice, which often moves the reader through depictions of the fragile realities of daily life such as the sound of small children walking in the melting snow, or the gliding of a bird on a frozen waterway. In his poems we feel his gentle spirit, wondering where the birds of yesterday have gone: did they find a better place?

Contents of the Chapters

The chapters collected in this volume illustrate the breadth of De Bruijn’s specialisations, ranging from Persian art and poetry to Islamic mysticism (Sūfism) and the history of Iranian Studies in Europe. While Persian mystical poetry could be seen as the centrepiece of his scholarship, the lives of

orientalists and the development of Persian Studies in Europe have always interested De Bruijn. A love for Persian mystical poetry was ignited in him through his studies of the influential poet Sanāʿī of Ghazna (d. ca. 1130), about whom De Bruijn wrote a seminal monograph entitled *Of Piety and Poetry: the Interaction of Religion and Literature in the Life and Works of Hakīm Sanāʿī of Ghazna*, which has inspired several other scholars to devote their attention to Sanāʿī, who is important for the history of both Islamic mysticism and Persian poetry.¹³ As Sanāʿī introduced antinomian mystical genres and motifs, De Bruijn has made extensive studies of this particular genre, examples of which are included in this book. Religious poetry and its application in Persian society and in courtly settings have interested De Bruijn from an early period. His studies should be considered as complementary to those of scholars such as Hellmut Ritter (1892–1971), whose magisterial work *Das Meer der Seele* focuses on the Persian religious and mystical works of the Persian poet Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d. 1221). De Bruijn’s chapters elaborate on religious subjects which he has chosen to treat separately, the results of new insights he has acquired through years of research. Since Persian poetry is a vehicle for conveying religious and mystical ideas, an aid to meditation and a medium for theoretical reflections and didacticism, de Bruijn’s scholarship also embraces these subjects. He has investigated how poetry is applied in each of these domains and how it has been received by diverse social hierarchies.

De Bruijn belongs to the generation of scholars who developed oriental studies into a professional occupation. He was a student of orientalists such as Johannes Hendrik Kramers (1891–1951), Joseph Franz Schacht (1902–1969), Seeger Adrianus Bonebakker (1923–2005) and Karl Emil Oskar Jahn (1906–1985).¹⁴ He tells fascinating stories about his experiences as a student in Leiden. One concerns his taking an examination at Joseph Schacht’s house. In those days, students used to go to the Professor’s house for examinations. At Schacht’s home, he sits behind a desk. Schacht gives him the questions and papers, but his big black cat enters the room. Schacht was very fond of this cat, and no one would dare to touch him. The cat jumps on the desk and sits on the exam papers. De Bruijn gingerly removes the cat while Schacht looks at him grumpily. De Bruijn tells many such anecdotes, both of his time as a student and later as a colleague of two generations of oriental scholars at Leiden University. He has made the history of Persian Studies in Europe, especially in the Netherlands, a subject of his scholarship. In this volume we have decided to include three chapters in which he analyses Iranian Studies in the Netherlands and individual scholars such as Adriaan Reland (1676–1718),

Carl Hermann Ethé (1844–1917), Joseph Freiherr von Hammer-Purgstall (1774–1856) and Edward G. Browne (1862–1926).

The idea of collecting his articles in one volume was formed on one of our walks near his house in Leiderdorp on a sunny Saturday afternoon. Reflecting on the state of Persian and Iranian Studies, he wanted to have the articles in one volume. I told him that it would certainly be a service to the field to bring these original and insightful articles together for the benefit of new generations of scholars and students. We have carefully selected these articles not merely to convey the range of his scholarship, but primarily to highlight the importance of the subjects they treat. Several of these articles are hard to obtain even in our digital age. Their quality demanded a new venue, as they are both outstanding examples of how to conduct research and analyses of enduring value, based on painstaking philological research. All these articles have been converted from the original books and journals into a new format with the assistance of Jos Coumans, the Secretary of the Dutch Omar Khayyam Society. We have used footnotes rather than endnotes, and a new transliteration system has been applied for the sake of consistency. I hope the reader will enjoy and be inspired by the individual chapters of this volume, as I have quenched my endless thirst for knowledge about Persian culture.

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