

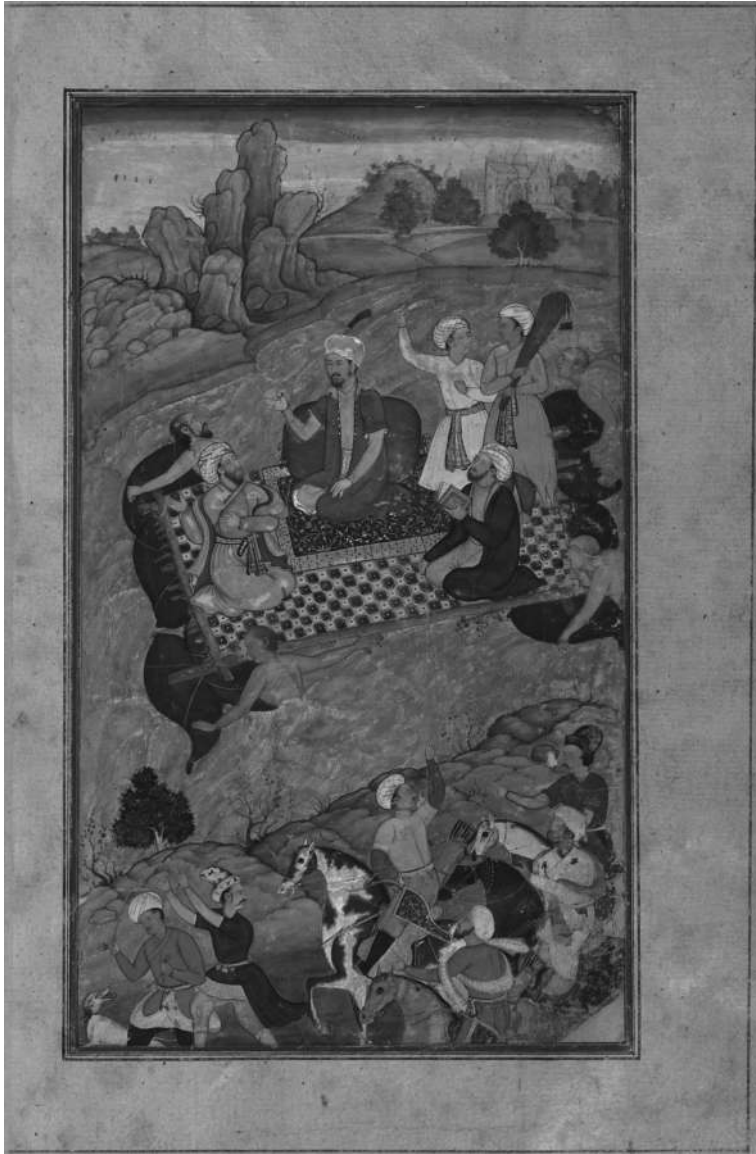
## Introduction

The origins of this Element go back to a moment many years ago when I came across an image regarding poetry in Zayn Khān Khwāfi's (d. 1533) partial Persian translation of the memoirs of Bābor (d. 1530), the founder of the Mughal dynasty in India. Writing in Chaghatay Turkish, Bābor mentions that, on the way to India in December 1525, he got separated from his troops during a river excursion. Adrift on a raft, the company took to the familiar pastime of composing poetic responses. Bābor offered the following Persian verse by a contemporary poet as the muse:

What is one to do with a beloved full of flirting.  
Wherever you are, what is one to do with anyone else.  
(*Bābor, 1995: 405*)

The scene in Bābor's memoir is evocative enough to have become the subject of a painting accompanying the text in a sumptuous manuscript produced in the late sixteenth century (see Figure 1). Khwāfi's translation of Bābor's memoir is adaptive rather than literal. His text refers to Bābor in the third person, transforming the original self-narrative into a report. Having mentioned the verse, he departs from the original to remark that Bābor's companions obeyed his command per the dictum, put into a hemistich, that a verse worthy of a king is a precious pearl. Their combined efforts were then comparable to elaborate jewelry dangling from the king's ear (Khwāfi, n.d.: 11a).

It struck me that comparing a pearl earring to a verse was especially apt as a means to understand poetic production as a market of goods and services in societies in the Middle Ages where Persian was an important literary medium. There is, first of all, the fact that the piece of jewelry and the pronounced verse intersect on the human ear. As objects denoting luxury and power, pearls were considered extremely valuable throughout Eurasia. Pearls were a paramount commodity involved in processes of mediation and exchange. Among rulers and other elites, pearls were acquired, displayed, gifted, stolen, and counterfeited as a part of political and economic activity. Pearls' value was a naturalized fact in this setting, creating the conditions that made them a form of fungible currency (Allsen, 2019). In societies where Persian mattered, circulation of poetry can be seen as analogous to the use of pearls. In the two cases, respectively, the worth of the material entity (a pearl) and the materialized product (a poetic utterance) reflected their enmeshment in political, economic, and aesthetic relations that permeated social imagination and experienced reality.



**Figure 1** “Bābor Riding a Raft.” From a copy of *Bābornāmeḥ*. Sixteenth century, India. Ink and pigments on remargined paper: 32 × 21 cm. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. W.596, Folio 17b.

Describing a poem made of verses as a string of pearls is a common metaphor in literary expression in Persian and associated traditions (Landau, 2015). My purpose here is to take the materiality implied in the metaphor seriously as a means to understanding social worlds. Here I understand materiality as an

overarching abstraction denoting relationships between physical objects, verbal utterances, mental ideas and images, and corporeal movements that constitute the framework for lived experience (Miller, 2005). My proposition, in essence, is that, in the societies where it mattered, Persian poetry was valued so highly as to permeate human beings' senses of themselves and all that surrounded them in the form of a materialized cosmos.

Poetry was regarded as a prized form of language generated by people possessing a combination of innate ability and acquired skill. While versification was exceedingly widespread, poetic talent – evaluated based on parameters I will discuss – was a finite resource. This made accomplished poets valuable craftspeople. Moreover, collecting and maintaining poetry in memory or on paper was akin to gathering a treasury. For those with resources, this required cultivating another cadre of people, those who articulated standards, analyzed and judged the words, and produced historical records to commemorate the virtuosi.

Poetry was also a linguistic vehicle uniquely suited to transmit knowledge meant to circulate within a restricted group. As verbal signification not meant to be taken literally, poetic speech was amenable to coding and jargon. This made it a mainstay of literature among Sufis and others who espoused forms of esotericism. Similarly, poetry was essential to the allusion-filled communications of elite secretaries who ran bureaucracy and diplomacy. Given these characteristics, Persian poetry's footprint as a social matter affords us an especially rich view of life's complexity during the Middle Ages.

### The Persian World

I should explain that the “Persian world,” as mentioned in the title of this Element, signifies a spatiotemporal abstraction keyed to a literary language. I have deliberately chosen this as the arena I wish to represent rather than specifying the topic based on periodization affixed to calendars and regions (history of Asia, the Middle East, etc.). In theoretical work pertaining to history, problems involved in using geographical and temporal markers as the basis for delimiting topics are well known by now (e.g. Bashir, forthcoming 2022; Black, 2018; Tanaka, 2019). This pertains especially to terms such as “the Middle Ages,” “medieval,” “early modern,” and so on that have bequeathed us ideologically inflected methodological and disciplinary exclusions. By displacing the matter to language use, I aim to contribute to the subversive intent of Global Middle Ages Elements. My objective is not to arrive at pristine new categories, untainted by problems. Rather, the usage is meant to spur appreciation for how categories inflect analyses toward particular ends.

My conceptualization invites seeing synchronic and diachronic connectivity in societies through the lens of a common language rather than maps, chronologies, and genealogies. In the course of my discussion, I do identify locations by names and provide Common Era dates in order to make the narrative legible in established vocabularies. However, I treat language use as the meta principle in order to highlight the autochthonous logic of my materials, in which connectivity is a matter of literary citation and not abstract chronology. Moreover, the choice can help us remain mindful of the fact that the cultural patterns I am describing are not the ruins of a dead past. Persian remains a major world language to this day. Especially in its modern institutionalized forms in Afghanistan, Iran, and Tajikistan, the poetic world I discuss is a crucial component of sociocultural inheritance for tens of millions in our contemporary world (Haeri, 2021; Najafian, 2018; Olszewska, 2015; Rubanovich, 2015; Schwartz, 2020; Van den Berg, 2004).

The phrase “Persian world” is a heuristic abstraction also because it can never be the sole descriptor for a society that existed in the past. My usage here is aligned with the notion that complex social settings are comprised of “divergent worldings constantly coming about through negotiations, enmeshments, crossings, and interruptions” (de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018: 6). Any given social situation always includes many worlds, tied to variant senses of time and space imbricated in subjectivities involved in social processes. It is important to keep in mind, then, that no society has ever existed in which Persian would be the only language of communication. From its ninth-century inception as the vernacular of peoples living in the Iranian plateau and Central Asia to today, Persian has always been a part of multilingual environments. On the literary side, this pertains to similar worlds of Arabic, Kurdish, various forms of Turkish, Hebrew, Pashto, Sanskrit, Braj Bhasha, Urdu-Hindi, Bangla, and so on. All these other worlds can be treated in a way similar to what I am attempting for Persian. My choice has to do with creating a limited topic rather than proclaiming Persian’s superiority or greater significance.

For the spoken realm, Persian itself has a myriad of dialects, all utilized simultaneously with literary Persian and forms of other languages. In modern situations the world over, Persian coexists with major European languages such as English, French, German, and Italian. Amidst all this diversity, a focus on the world of formalized poetry in Persian is a choice meant to facilitate analysis rather than a descriptive claim about a specific society.

In some cases, the relationship between Persian and other languages involves transmission of literary patterns. This has led to the neologism “Persianate” from Persian, on the pattern of Italianate from Italian (Amanat and Ashraf, 2018; Green, 2019). I avoid this term for the reason that, to my mind, it can

imply a presumption of hierarchy between Persian and other linguistic worlds. In parallel with the critique of “cosmopolitanism” as a category implying a built-in elitism, positing Persian as the lingua franca of a premodern “cosmopolis,” anchored in a literary medium, can have the effect of rendering nonparticipants uncosmopolitan, and hence, lesser beings in terms of cultural sophistication (Mignolo, 2000). For my purposes, the adjective “Persian” has the same explanatory efficacy as “Persianate,” while it also avoids signifying stratification in the process of discussing literary and cultural connectivity.

### The Market

The invocation of a “market” in the title of this essay is a strategic reification to create an exploratory arena. This is akin to how we talk about the stock or commodity markets tied to goods and services, which go up or down, even though we know that these are not entities with agency but abstractions denoting a set of human relations. Through the market metaphor, I wish to highlight poetry’s place in the overlap between metaphysics and materiality. As language, poetic expression is a product of the mind, tied to matters pertaining to ontology, cosmology, epistemology, and rhetoric. But the language is discernible only when it appears on paper, buildings, and other media. Put to speech via the human mouth, poetry becomes embodied, forming the basis for conversation, recitation, and rituals.

As a diversified and changing art form, poetry is an intangible but pervasive and highly valued discourse. When instantiated as a verse that is spoken or written, poetry is a tangible, materialized object, with exchange value accruing to those able to produce or reproduce it. Processes for creating and valuing poetry that I discuss in this Element hearken consistently to its double valuation as discourse and object. Concentrating on play pertaining to Persian poetry in the Middle Ages provides views into social dynamics at the broadest level.

In Persian literary history, social aspects of poetic production have been discussed predominantly through highlighting relationships between patrons and poets. By invoking the market, I wish to displace our understanding of poets’ positioning as a matter of elite patronage alone. In my conceptualization, the market and patronage are interlocked social processes. When employed by royal figures or other elites, poets may certainly be described as one half of patronage relationships that formed the economic basis for the production of poetry. However, I see the dyadic relationship as a part of the wider market within which poets and their words circulated among patrons spread over a vast geography. Many significant poets were wealthy and socially advantaged to the point of not needing patronage. Poetry was a mainstay of cultural life among all

classes. Because of these factors, a market comprised of the exchange of material goods and social capital is an especially useful framework with which to understand poetry as a social matter. The greater capacity of the market metaphor helps us see poetic production as a part of socioeconomic relations that went beyond patron–poet dualities.

Through materialization in objects and bodies, poetry is a carrier of social relations, a “thing” desired and trafficked in a market in conjunction with other things of value. Under authoritative discourses, whether articulated or presumed, poetry is subject to processes involving creation, preservation, repackaging, evaluation, derision, and so on. The market is my overarching framework for presenting a picture of poetry acting as a mediator in various facets of social life. This way to think about poetry takes us not just to literature but also to ethics, politics, history, religion, diplomacy, and overall paradigms for individual and communal existence.

I realize that the market metaphor as deployed here has the potential to become overdrawn. For this reason, I invoke it largely only when framing the discussions, in the interest of imparting a sophisticated understanding of a large and complex topic in very limited space. For readers who might find this grating on occasion, I can say that, at least in part, the analogy is meant to be tongue in cheek. By depicting poetic exchange as a market of goods and services, I hope also to denaturalize the way the market as an economic metaphor dominates our sense of the world today. Economic markets are never about finances alone, and this discussion of poetry may help to sensitize us to literary and other social products that undergird financial relationships. The market metaphor can take us to issues beyond what I discuss explicitly; I trust that readers will extend my suggestions to areas of interest to them.

The Element is divided into four sections. To provide a concrete sense for the place of poetry in the Persian world, I begin by presenting autobiographical elements from an author who was himself a poet and dedicated decades of his life to creating a lengthy work consisting of poets’ life stories and samples of their work spanning a period of seven centuries (ca. 950–1650 CE). While stylized and conforming to genre, this narrative brings out poetry’s enmeshment in subjectivity, interpersonal relations, and religious and sociopolitical patterns.

In the second section, I delve into Persian discussions that define poetry, elaborate on how and why it works, and comment on its valuation for social purposes. Rather than proceeding from a definition, I wish to emphasize that contestation on the very notion of poetry is a crucial part of the story. The theoretical discourse I highlight is culled from different social and professional locations and provides us the means to appreciate commonality and variation within the imagined community of interpretation.

The third section takes us to anthologies of poets' works and lives. In addition to introducing a few highly celebrated figures, narrative patterns for the poetic past indicate how poetic expression was turned into varied cultural memory with presumed inner momentum leading to apotheoses. The works I have chosen for this category sensitize us to issues concerning genealogy, hierarchy, and gender.

The last section of the Element takes up especially complex examples pertaining to poetry's social salience. I present works in composite genres (translation, history, memoir, and collections meant for self-fashioning) to highlight poetry's wide reach as discourse, practice, and authority in existential matters. Materials covered in this section are not usually treated in scholarship on Persian poetry. My choice to highlight them is part of the effort to show how, in the Persian world, poetry should be a part of the discussion in fields beyond literary history and theory.

### Note on Usages

All non-English texts quoted in this Element are my own translations. In cases where English translations exist, I have retranslated based on my preferences. For poetry, I have chosen to use free verse for all genres rather than attempting to create a correspondence between Persian and English forms (e.g. heroic couplets or blank verse for *masnavi*, sonnet for *ghazal*, etc.). Assigning English genre terms to Persian poetic forms is generally a fraught matter and is beyond the scope of the current topic (Utas, 2008). While lack of meter and rhyme certainly distance the translations from the "feel" of the originals, I find that free verse is easiest on the ear and mind when encountering poetry in English today.

Names of peoples, places, and works are transliterated according to a highly simplified scheme. Consonants are represented as pronounced in Persian even when words may be of Arabic or other origin (e.g. "z" for *zay*, *dhay*, and *dhad*; "s" for *thay*, *sin*, and *sad*; etc.). Short vowels are given as "a," "e," "o," and long vowels as "ā," "ī," and "u." Hamza and 'ayn are represented by the apostrophe (') and single inverted comma (ˆ) respectively. The notation "b." as part of personal names means "son of" and "daughter of" (*ebn* or *bent*). Whenever available, I have used place names in their established English spellings, transliterating only when places are likely to be obscure to most readers. The first time a city or region is mentioned, I provide, in parentheses, the name of the modern country in which it is now located.

## 1 A Walk in Poetic Timespace

In the first half of the seventeenth century, Taqiuddin Mohammad Awhadi-Balyāni (d. ca. 1640, hereafter Awhadi) produced a work on Persian poetry that

is extraordinary on two counts. The first thing of note about the work, entitled *'Arafātol-āsheqin va 'arasātol-ārefin* (The Resurrection Ground of Lovers and the Courtyards of Knowers), is its length. Running to nearly 5,000 pages in one printed edition, it contains entries on more than 3,500 poets, distributed throughout Iran and Central and South Asia during seven centuries prior to the point of writing. Much of the text consists of citations of poetry. The work's sheer scope makes it perhaps the longest anthology cum biographical dictionary of Persian poets ever composed (Golchin-Ma'āni, 1984: 2:3–21).

The second noteworthy aspect of Awhadi's work is a distinctive organization that forefronts poetry as a unique form of verbal expression locatable in human lives. Departing from existing patterns for biographical dictionaries that I discuss later in this Element, Awhadi's scheme eviscerates calendrical time and mappable space. Instead, he asks the reader to accompany him on a stroll through a "poetry-scape" born of combining the order of the Arabic alphabet with poetry's development from the distant past to the author's present.

Awhadi imagines time as a vast ground akin to the plain of 'Arafat in Mecca that figures prominently in the annual rite of the hajj. During the pilgrimage, attendees are required to stand in this plain for several hours on one day as a preview for the resurrection promised for the end of time. In Islamic eschatology, God is expected to reconstitute all humans to be present at such a plain once the world has been dissolved. Awhadi's invitation to imagine time as a resurrection plain self-consciously mimics the divine function, except that his purview is limited to the segment of humanity that consists of Persian poets. As in the ultimate resurrection, Awhadi's resurrection collapses the normative sequencing of time and allows people from all periods to be present simultaneously in a single narrativized place.

The resurrection ground – a representation of embodied time consisting of poets' lives – is then split into twenty-eight courtyards that correspond to the letters of the Arabic alphabet (the additional four Persian letters are subsumed within the Arabic list). In this process, time that had first become space is now divided into the building blocks of language. Each courtyard/letter is then further divided into three enclosures that contain poets divided between "the ancients" (*motaqaddemin*), the "middle ones" (*motavassetin*), and the "contemporaries" (*mota'akhkherin*). Poets are placed in the enclosures within the courtyards on the plain according to where their poetic names (*takhallos*) occur in alphabetical order (Awhadi, 2010: 1:32–36). The division into enclosures has a temporal structure, although the categorization is now subordinate to the rule of language. Time is first eliminated and then reestablished as a subcategory within the linguistic abstraction that is the alphabet.



Approached based on normative expectations regarding history, Awhadi's narrative is disorienting and possibly disconcerting. For example, on a single page, one can be asked to move to lives located centuries and vast distances apart. The unifying element, crucial to the narrative's success, is the author's judgment on poets and poetry. For the presentation to be efficacious, the reader must trust Awhadi as the articulator of poetic tradition. The anchor for this trust is the author's first-person voice, which is present in three separable forms in the narrative. First, the introduction contains a summary of his life story, highlighting his credentials as a poetic adjudicator. Second, he treats himself as an entry within his scheme and provides copious examples of his own poetry. He used the pen name "Taqi," so we find him in the "contemporary" enclosure in the courtyard of the letter *tay* (2:882–925). And third, his voice seeps through in numerous entries on others from his own time. He provides details for personal encounters and relationships, including stories of studentship, camaraderie, competition, and conflict.

Awhadi's picture of the world contemporary to him shows poets moving around extensively for reasons such as exile and alienation, seeking knowledge and training, and pursuing economic or social opportunities. The social prestige of Persian poetry is a stable field of endeavor in lives that, otherwise, appear quite insecure due to material circumstances as well as emotional states evoked constantly in the verses Awhadi cites. To convey a more particularized sense for the place of poetry in the Persian world, I will provide some details from Awhadi's self-representations. His circumstances as well as his encyclopedic familiarity with the literary corpus as it existed in the early seventeenth century can help us situate poetry in society. Moreover, this author's career exemplifies how poetic knowledge and prestige were acquired through a kind of practice-oriented education in courts and other prominent settings in society.

In the autobiographical narrative in the introduction, Awhadi states that he was born in Isfahan (Iran), on 3 Moharram, 973 AH (July 31, 1565 CE), into a family known for its religious accomplishments. He was an orphan at birth because his father had left for a journey to India after his conception and had then died, away from home, before the delivery. Awhadi claims that he weaned from his mother suddenly at the age of one and that – from that point to when he was writing at the age of fifty – he could remember almost everything that had passed in front of his senses "like etchings on stone" (1:18). This suggests an eidetic memory, which is plausible given the number and extent of citations provided in his work.

During his childhood, he benefited from a scheme instituted by Shah Tahmāsp (d. 1576), the reigning Safavid king in Iran. Based on a dream, this king had decreed that, in every city of his realm, he would bear the educational

and living expenses of forty orphans who were Sayyeds (descendants of the Prophet Mohammad). Chosen for this charity, Awhadi excelled in school, avoiding frivolous games that were the norm for children. Successful over his peers in the religious and philosophical sciences, he had an aptitude for poetry as well. However, his mother and other guardians dissuaded him from it, considering it unserious and of lesser value as a career compared to the religious sciences that he was expected to master on account of his heritage and evident talent. In his entry on himself as a poet, he states that he became serious about poetry from the age of nine by starting to study commentaries by experts (2:883). Any qualms he may have retained on this ceased when his mother died when he was twelve and left him in the world without any immediate family (1:20).

The childhood part of Awhadi's narrative shows poetry to be a distinctive discourse in competition with other forms of remunerative literary activity. Especially in sixteenth-century Iran, Sayyeds could leverage their genealogy to acquire status among the powerful scholarly classes. For a person born with this privilege, going toward poetry was to trade an assured career for insecurity. Moreover, for some, poetry was morally suspect on intellectual as well as social grounds. To become involved in poetry was thus a risky prospect on multiple counts.

Between the ages of twelve and twenty, Awhadi spent time in the Iranian cities of Isfahan, Yazd, and Shiraz, becoming ever more adept at many kinds of learning. His inward concentration on the development of his connection to God led eventually to a vision of the Prophet Mohammad, a customary marker of divine favor. His description of the vision has few details, conveying an experience where he simply perceived a visual encounter with the Prophet's body. Especially for a Sayyed, a vision of the revered ancestor often acted as a form of initiation that ratified the genealogical distinction. Awhadi represents the vision as marking the moment when the status of his own body changed from being ordinary material to being that of someone who was truly alive. On the social side, when he reached maturity he was invited to become a part of the household of an uncle by marrying his daughter. While acknowledging the kindness toward an orphan, he declined the offer in order not to become tied down to an ordinary life (1:23–24).

At twenty, Awhadi joined the retinue of the Safavid king Mohammad Khodābandeh (d. 1595–6), Tahmāsp's successor, who was blind. He then traveled to various cities as a part of the court, acting as a poet as well as a repository able to recall verses by others. The political situation in Iran underwent a significant change when Shāh 'Abbās (d. 1629) ascended the throne in 1588 and began major projects to consolidate and expand the empire.