THE FUNCTION OF THE CATALOGUE OF POETS
IN PERSIAN POETRY

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Classical Persian poets often included a catalogue of objects, places, and sometimes people, in order to display their rhetorical skills in a particular poem. Although the term ‘catalogue’ is a rhetorical device used in medieval Western literary scholarship, the Persian rhetorical figure of *murāʿāt* al-naẓīr or *tanāsub* (other terms used are *iʿtilāf, talfīq, tawfīq*), defined as “observance of the similar or congruity”² perhaps approximates the definition of catalogue. A catalogue of poets was utilized by poets in all periods of Persian literature; however, the function that this catalogue plays in a poem varied from poem to poem. Most often, a list of poets from the past provided a mini literary canon and furnished an intellectual genealogy for the poet. In general, there are two broad categories of poems, in all the major forms such as *mathnavī, qaṣīda* and *ghazal*, in which such catalogues are found: one in which the poet lists the accomplished masters of a specific genre or form; the second in which the names of poets, their *takhalluṣ*, also carry their semantic meaning, as demonstrated in the discussion below. Rather than merely accepting these catalogues as random instances of displays of literary skill, such poems require further scrutiny into their literariness and enduring popularity across forms and genres over time. On a comparative level, in Elizabethan English poetry, in a nascent form of literary criticism, poets employed the “method of the ‘roll-call,’ a catalogue of poets, in which one name follows another, each with its tag of critical comment. These comments are limited by a narrow range of critical terminology, a few words of praise or blame, some commonplace, some more highly coloured, and the judgments that they express are those of a well established literary tradition or of the common

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opinion of their time." The Persian poems show a more complex and subtle use of the 'roll-call' in the overall structure of the poem and, perhaps, another European context is closer to it. This device is also used by the medieval German poet Gottfried von Strassburg who uses the catalogue of poets metaphorically "to reflect and substantiate his own aesthetic programme of the correlations of 'wort' [word] and 'sin' [meaning]." This suggests a useful framework for approaching the Persian poems where the act of creating and interpretation of the poem are motivated by specific aesthetic and metaphoric programmes. A study of representative verses and poems in which catalogues of poets are found will allow us to study the full range of uses of this rhetorical device as a metaphor for the composition of poetry.

Most poets who make use of the catalogue of poets do not theorize about its rhetorical application in the structure and meaning of their poems because Persian poetic language was to a great extent analogical and depended on unspecified associations. One poet who does provide a template for reading such verses is ʿAṭṭār (d. ca. 1220) in ten lines from his long didactic-mystical poem, Mūṣībat-nāma. In the context of a discourse on poetry, ʿAṭṭār states that poetry (shiʿr), the empyrean (ʿarsh) and religious law (shar) share the same letters and are fundamental to the two worlds. When the earth is illumined by the sky, the three letters cause the two worlds to share the same attributes. He then says: Although the sun has become heavenly (samāʾī), in luminosity it has become a brilliant genus (jins-i sanāʾī). The reference here is to Sanāʾī (d. 1131), the late Ghaznavid poet, who was the primary influence on ʿAṭṭār. This then allows him launch into a catalogue of poets, using their takhalluṣes in their semantic meaning:

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