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Love Letters: Letter Symbolism in Ḥāfiẓ's Poetry

PATRICK SYKES
Dehkhoda International Center for Persian Studies

ABSTRACT: Persian poets since Rūdakī have drawn on the letter symbolism of the Perso-Arabic alphabet. Visually, its characters have attracted poets who find the likeness of the beloved in their shapes. Spiritually, it enjoys a special status as the language of the Koran and therefore, in the eyes of some, God. Classical Persian lyric poetry combined these aesthetic and religious connotations, and as one of the foremost voices in that tradition, Ḥāfiẓ was no exception. But a review of the extant literature shows that, as a trope, letter symbolism has been largely overlooked when compared with wine, the moth, or the candle. Through a comprehensive study of the letters' use in Ḥāfiẓ's *dīvān*, this article argues that, by playing with particular letters' connotations, or punning on their physical shapes and homographs, Ḥāfiẓ invokes disparate meanings, only to then reveal their underlying unity, in the process affirming the affinity between love and language, the beloved and the divine.

KEYWORDS: Ḥāfiẓ, alphabet, letterism, Sufi, lyric poetry

Introduction

Many of the symbolic tropes that recur throughout Ḥāfiẓ's poetry and the wider Persian lyric tradition have been studied extensively. The roster includes wine, trees, the morning wind (*ṣabā*), and gardens.[1]

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With scholars rightly preoccupied with the words on the page, individual letters have not received the same scrutiny in the existing academic literature in either English or Persian. But the symbolism associated with the Perso-Arabic alphabet is a trope in its own right that goes back to the first poets of the classical Persian canon.

> *Zulf-i tu rā 'jīm' ki kard ānki ū*
> *khāl-i tu rā nuqṭa-yi ān jīm kard*
>
> Who made your tress into a *jīm*? He who
> made your beauty spot the dot in that *jīm*
> (Rūdakī)[2]

In this study I analyze visual forms of letter symbolism like those above, but also other ways in which letters are used to represent meanings beyond that of a unit of the alphabet; punning on the homophones of letters' names is one such way. ʿAyn, for example, is the twenty-first letter of the Persian alphabet but also means "eye" and happens to resemble an eye in its medial form. Encoding numerical information in the form of letters is another way of generating additional layers of meaning.

As Schimmel writes, "It is scarcely possible to fully understand and enjoy the poetry of the Muslim world, mainly of Iran and the neighboring countries, without a thorough knowledge of the meaning given to the letters."[3] Within that poetic canon, Ḥāfiẓ's status as, in Ilahi-Ghomshei's words, "Persia's greatest lyricist" makes him a natural place to start.[4] Moreover, in the context of the Persian lyric tradition of poetic imitation and homage, if Ḥāfiẓ's collected works (*dīvān*) indeed "constitutes an intra-textual commentary on the lyrical tradition present in Persia since the eleventh century" and his prominence in that canon is deserved, he offers a specific case study that can also speak to the phenomenon as a whole.[5] That is not to mention the relatively wide use of letter symbolism in his poems, nor his varying engagement with Sufi teachings that so emphasized the importance of orthography as a trope.[6]

Bürgel argues that it is the ostensible juxtapositions and contradictions that make reading Ḥāfiẓ difficult, and the unpacking of their underlying unity that makes reading him a delight.[7] Ḥāfiẓ's use of alphabet symbolism, I suggest, offers one way to access this underlying

unity. By playing with letters' symbolic associations, or punning on their physical shapes and homographs, he invokes divergent meanings and then shows how they can be reconciled to affirm underlying affinities between love and language, the beloved and the divine.

The primary sources for this study were gathered through a comprehensive search for the name of every letter of the Persian alphabet in Ḥāfiẓ's *dīvān* on the online Ganjoor archive.[8] Items that contained the name of a letter, such as the word "Islam," which includes the letter *lām*, were excluded. One instance of the letter *ʿayn* (ghazal 152) was not analyzed because its meaning was based on homographs, rather than any association with the letter itself.[9] Otherwise, this article encompasses all instances of letter symbolism in Ḥāfiẓ's *dīvān*.

Letter Symbolism in the Persian Lyric Tradition

Like any other trope in Persian lyric poetry, letter symbolism was one part of a broader tradition of poetic homage and imitation in which poets would take up, refashion, or respond to the work of their predecessors.

> In composing classical Islamic verse, poets always drew on or referred to a model which was the outcome of previous experience but also governed future poems: the continuous advancing of a tradition began in the past, encompassed the present and laid the basis for the future.[10]

By replying to (*istijvāb*) and receiving/welcoming (*istiqbāl*) their predecessors and peers, poets would seek to adopt pervasive preexisting tropes, master them in their own work and hope to advance the tradition—all within the stringent lyrical constraints.[11] Ḥāfiẓ was as much engaged in this "sport" of competitive homage as anyone else. He openly declared his favored sources within his poems:

> *Ustād-i ghazal Saʿdīst nazd-i hama kas ammā*
> *dārad sukhan-i Ḥāfiẓ' ṭarz-i ghazal-i Khājū*
>
> No one holds a candle to Saʿdī's ghazal, but
> Ḥāfiẓ's words move to the beat of *Khājū's* [Kirmānī's] ghazal[12]

De Bruijn's assertion that "it would be difficult to name any individual element of Hafez's poems, either formal or thematic, which cannot be attested in the works of his predecessors" is thus testament to the poet's depth of knowledge and range of reference, not unoriginality.[13] Indeed, for Lewisohn,

> Hāfiz's success lay in how skilfully he could paraphrase, imitate, reply to and so hopefully excel those poets by his original manipulation of the same raw materials—images, symbols, ideas, metres and rhymes—that they had employed.[14]

As a device, the alphabet and its symbolism was one such raw material.

The existing Persian literature on letter symbolism, albeit limited, provides a good indication of the extent of this trope. Bāqirī has collected examples of its use by nineteen classical Persian poets and identifies Rūdakī as the vanguard.[15] Maʿrūf goes through each letter, in turn collating relevant lines from both Persian and Arabic.[16] Their surveys demonstrate the staying power of particular comparisons between the letters' physical geometry and the features of the beloved: from Rūdakī to Ḥāfiẓ and Kamāl Khujandī, *alif* invokes elegant posture, *mīm* a mouth, *jīm* a tress of hair, *ʿayn* an eye.

> *Dāl zulf u alif qāmat u mīm dahānash*
> Her hair a *dāl*, her stature an *alif*, her mouth a *mīm*[17]

> *Zi ḥarf-i ʿayn-i chashm-i ū, zi ẓarf-i jīm gūsh-i ū*
> Her eye, the letter *ʿayn*; her ear, the vessel of *jīm*[18]

Schimmel dedicates an appendix of her book on mystical dimensions of Islam to letter symbolism in Sufi poetry, in which she argues that Sufis were particularly drawn to its capacity as a mystical device.[19] But she discusses Ḥāfiẓ only in a passing example of the importance of *alif*, discussed further below.

The literature also classifies different kinds of letter symbolism. Ḥājiyān-Nizhād distinguishes three types: comparison (*tashbīh*) based on part of a letter, based on whole letters, or using several letters to suggest larger expressions (for example *lā* to invoke the

shahāda).[20] Ḥāfiẓ does not make use of the third kind, and the former two are contained within the first of a rival taxonomy, that of Bāqirī. He distinguishes between letter symbolism rooted in the physical shape of letters (tall, straight *alif*, gently curving *jīm*, and so on, and the beloved's resemblance to them), and "a mystical view of letters that manifests the condition and secrets of mysticism"—notably *alif*.[21]

Maʿrūf, however, makes no mention of the letter *qāf* in either Arabic or Persian, for example, while Bāqirī's section on Ḥāfiẓ is incomplete and includes a *bayt* (distich) from a poem that is also attributed to Khājū Kirmānī.[22] These studies are valuable because they show us the extent of letter symbolism in Persian poetry and clearly demonstrate its staying power as a lyrical trope, but they are less concerned with analysis of how and why poets may actually use it.

Except for Schimmel, they also largely gloss over the intellectual and religious context that charged the letters of the alphabet with meaning, anchored in reverence for Arabic as the language of Koran and a persistent preoccupation with analysis of its language for a better understanding of the divine.[23]

An obvious example of this would be the exegesis of *al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭaʿāt* (the disconnected letters), the isolated letters that begin several of the Koranic *sūra*s.[24] These letters remain enigmatic codes, the deciphering of which is thought to reveal to the believer a divine truth.[25] Judging by his moniker,[26] Ḥāfiẓ was certainly aware of these, including the initial *qāf* from which *sūra* 50 takes its name and the eponymous mountain that it describes.[27] But Ma'rūf's omission of *qāf* from his overview of letter symbolism means that Ḥāfiẓ's own use of *qāf*, discussed in the below analysis, escapes his study.

The same scrutiny of the Koran's language spawned a dedicated science of letters (*'ilm al-ḥurūf*) and a letterist (*ḥurūfī*) doctrine of Islam. It is beyond the focus of this study to discuss these developments in detail, but it is sufficient to note that both sought to understand the divine through letters of the alphabet.[28] The science of letters, which flourished in the late fourth century, studied "the occult properties of the letters of the alphabet and of the divine and angelic names which they form," in part through interpretation of the numerical values ascribed to each letter.[29] The construction of phrases, known as chronograms (*māddayi tārīkh*), to encode such

information became particularly popular in Persian poetry by the fifteenth century, but examples are to be found in Ḥāfiẓ too, and will be discussed below.[30] As a doctrine within Islam, letterism or hurufism, as developed by Faḍlullāh Astarābādī (d. 796/1394), traced affinities between letters and the human form. "This led the Hurufis . . . to look upon man as the Divine theophany."[31]

In Schimmel's analysis, these affinities sparked the common notion in Sufi poetry that "the face of the beloved is like a marvellously written manuscript of the Koran," and the poet, through praise of that beauty, frames the relationship with God as that of a lover and their beloved.[32] This religious and literary context is the backdrop against which one must understand Ḥāfiẓ's comparisons of the beloved to the letters of that text through letter symbolism.

Letter Symbolism in Ḥāfiẓ's Poetry: *Alif*

Of all the letters of the alphabet, *alif* has received particular attention, particularly from Sufis.[33] It is the first letter of the Perso-Arabic alphabet, the first letter of the Koran after the *bismillāh*—where it is the first of the *muqaṭṭaʿāt*—and the first letter in the name of the first human, Ādam (Adam). A straight vertical line isolated in writing, it resembles the numeral 1 (and even more so the Arabic numeral ١), which is in turn its value in the Arabic abjad, in which letters are assigned a value in order to encode numerical information in words.

"Isolated and yet active," as Schimmel puts it,[34] *alif* is thought to bridge God above and man below, with Sahl al-Tustarī going further still to argue it is a symbol for God himself, "who has connected all things and yet is isolated from all things."[35] Its status as the initial, primary letter is further reinforced because it provides the basic shape that is manipulated to form many other letters (*dāl*, *bi*, and *ri* as partially bent manipulations, and *nūn* as an extension of the same contortion).

Ḥāfiẓ twice employs *alif* in *abjad*, both times in elegiac poems for the dead. After extolling the virtues of his subjects, he writes in one,

> *Nāf-i hafta būd u az māh-i ṣafar kāf u alif*
> *si bi gulshan shud u īn gulkhan-i pur dūd bihisht*
> *Ānka maylash su-yi ḥaqqbīnī u ḥaqqgū'ī būd*
> *sāl-i tārīkh-i vafātash ṭalab az mayl-i bihisht.*

It was Tuesday the 21st in the month of Safar
when he went to the rose garden and waved goodbye to this hazy world.
Let he who is inclined to truth-seeing and truth-telling
determine the date of his death from the "inclination of Paradise."[36]

And in another,

Nāf-i hafta bud u az māh-i rajab kāf u alif
ki burūn raft az īn khāna-yi bīnaẓm u nasaq . . .
Sāl-i tārikh-i vafātash ṭalab az raḥmat-i ḥaqq

It was Wednesday the 21st in the month of Rajab
that he left this house of disorder . . .
Demand the year of his death from the "mercy of God."[37]

The freestanding *kāf* and *alif* in the first *miṣraʿ* (hemstitch) of the first distich of both poems are meaningless in and of themselves. As we will see below, a lone *alif* might not be, but *kāf* does not share *alif*'s philosophical connotations, and so the combination is unintuitive. Both examples in fact encode dates through the abjad system. *Alif* has the value of 1 and *kāf* 20, together providing the date when the subjects died: the twenty-first. The months differ (Ṣafar in the first, Rajab in the second), but the day is the same. The "navel of the week" refers to Tuesday, the middle of the Persian and Arabic week. Meanwhile the second distich of each poem encodes the year, inviting us to "demand the date of his death from 'the inclination of heaven'" and in the second example "from 'the mercy of God.'" By calculating the sum of the letters within the phrases in single quotation marks, we arrive at the years 787 and 756, respectively.

Alif's unitary status is again reinforced in its numerical value of one, but it is also significant that the abjad system is not self-evident. Its codes must be recognized as such before they can be deciphered. Its art lies in the concealment of an underlying meaning beneath a superficial (but nonetheless beautiful, sensical, and perfectly rhyming) one. In the first poem, Ḥāfiẓ plays on the double

meaning of *ḥaqq* as both "God" and "truth," directing his imperative to whoever sees and hears *ḥaqq*. The reader unversed in abjad will read the second distich of each poem as an instruction to turn to God for those who seek to know the year of the subject's death. A familiar reader, however, will detect the invitation to find the "truth" of the distich by deciphering the code. The twist is that both ways are equally viable. Whether one appeals to human artifice or divine judgment, the answer will be identical: like *alif*, the *ḥaqq* in question spans the realms of the mortal and the divine.

Elsewhere, *alif* is employed for its elegant shape, functioning as a metaphor for the stature of the muse.

Nīst bar lauḥ-i dilam juz alif-i qāmat-i dūst
chi kunam ḥarf-i digar yād nadād ustādam

The tablet of my heart is blank save the *alif* of my beloved's stature
What can I do? My master taught me no other letter (*ḥarf*)
(Ghazal 317)[38]

The impression that Ḥāfiẓ's muse had on him is visualized as the letter *alif*, to which the beloved's elegance and posture are likened. The "master" who wrote this letter could be a literal teacher—a Sufi master, for example—or the beloved.

What is important here is that the master's sole task was to transmit this one letter—not because the master was incapable of more, but because of *alif*'s self-sufficiency, its ability to stand alone yet generate other letters. Since the word for "letter" (*ḥarf*) in Persian also means a longer utterance, Ḥāfiẓ suggests that mastery of this one primary letter is the originator of his celebrated linguistic abilities.

In the following ghazal, the cedar tree bows to serve the higher grace of the beloved, whose stature is again likened to *alif*.

Har sarv ki dar chaman darāyad
dar khidmat-i qāmatat nigūn bād . . .
Qad(d)-i hama dilbarān-i ʿālam
pīsh-i alif-i qadat chu nūn bād

Har dil ki zi ʿishq-i tust khālī
az ḥalqa-yi vaṣl-i tu bīrūn bād

Every cedar that springs from the ground
stands in the service of your stature, prostrated . . .
The stature of all the lovers of the world
before the *alif* of your stature, is like *nūn,* prostrated.
May every heart empty of love for you
remain outside the ring of your embrace.
(Ghazal 107)[39]

The cedar tree is a trope of its own in Persian lyric poetry, always a symbol of the beloved's elegance.[40] Ḥāfiẓ's playful subversion of the trope is possible only because of the strength of the symbolic tradition it seeks to upend, as in ghazal 39: "What need does our garden have of cedars and firs? / *Bāgh-i marā chi ḥājat-i sarv u ṣanowbarast.*" In ghazal 107, the cedars themselves bow at the feet of the muse, whose true analogue is *alif*. While Ḥāfiẓ says that other lovers, in theory, also enjoy a resemblance to *alif*, they too are crooked in comparison with his own muse, to such an extent that they are more like the letter *nūn*—an *alif* almost bent into a circle. They are thus reduced to either a poor replica or a faulty derivative of the archetypal, pure *alif* embodied in Ḥāfiẓ's muse.

While Ḥāfiẓ's beloved is the original archetype, the 1 from which it is possible to proceed and in relation to which one orients oneself, the same beloved is also likened in the third distich of ghazal 107 to a circle (*ḥalqa*). Ḥāfiẓ pleads that love be the precondition to access this privileged zone, outside of which are only "empty" hearts devoid of value. Like a binary code, the beloved is both one and zero, everything and nothing, only the combination of which brings meaning to noise.

The use of letters to symbolize archetypes is not limited to *alif*. In ghazal 36, Ḥāfiẓ writes,

Dar kham-i zulf-i tu ān khāl-i siyah dānī chīst?
nuqṭa-yi dūda ki dar ḥalqa-yi jīm uftādast

Do you know what it is, that beauty spot in the curve of
your hair?
a black spot fallen from the ring of *jīm*[41]

Like almond eyes and locks of tresses of hair, the beauty spot (*khāl*) is a standard feature of Ḥāfiẓ's muse. As its English name suggests, it is usually taken as an indication of beauty in and of itself, something that people might artificially add to their faces in order to appear more beautiful. But here a tress of his beloved's hair, curled in a half circle around the beauty spot on their face, prompts his admiration not because it combines two standard lyrical tropes, but because the combination resembles a letter of the alphabet, *jīm*: ج.

We saw above that the same formation had earlier attracted the attention of Rūdakī. There are, however, key differences between these two masters' handling of its poetics. Rūdakī's image is of a divine creator deliberately putting the finishing touches to his masterpiece, but in Ḥāfiẓ's version the "fallen" spot suggests a much more natural, almost accidental beauty. His question "Do you know what it is?" suggests that we have only partially understood prior references to it. Indeed, the addressee appears unaware of what exactly has attracted Ḥāfiẓ, whereas the *jīm* of Rūdakī's beloved appears self-evident.

Like a phrase encoded in abjad, the tress of hair is here perfectly sensical and beautiful in itself but also contains a deeper meaning that those who heed the writer's invitation can deconstruct. Rhetorically speaking, Rūdakī is concerned with the identity of the author, whereas Ḥāfiẓ is preoccupied with the author's creation, which he suggests has not been fully appreciated by us or even the beloved. The latter's exposition of the metaphorical mechanics is fitting, for if the lover's beauty is reminiscent of language, the lovestruck poet is its translator.

Another recurring letter in Ḥāfiẓ's *dīvān* is *ʿayn*. In ghazal 384, for example,

> *Ay nūr-i chashm-i mastān dar ʿayn-i inṭizāram*
> *chang-i ḥazīn u jāmī binvāz yā bigardān*
>
> O light of the eyes of the drunks, sitting in the eye of my anticipation
> Play the sad harp, or pass around the cup[42]

The reading of *ʿayn* as "eye" is flagged by the earlier mention of the "light of the eyes" in the same hemistich. Like the letter's initial eye-shaped curve that awaits its completion, this places the speaker in the

eye or epicenter of a storm of shared anticipation, surrounded by others who likewise seek sad songs with which to drown their sorrows.

Ḥāfiẓ is here also punning on the alternative reading of *ʿayn* as "source," in which case the speaker occupies the origin of expectation, from which all other instances derive. His was the original longing, against which that of his peers pales in comparison—like the "other lovers" who come to resemble *nūn* compared with the *alif* of Ḥāfiẓ's muse in ghazal 107 above. Ḥāfiẓ thus extends *alif*'s special status as the progenitor of subsequent letters to *ʿayn*: it too is a "source" both in the sense that it literally has this particular meaning but also because the wordplay extends its meanings.

ʿAyn's generative properties—as a letter and a word—are also evident in the following example.

Gar khamr-i bihishtast birīzīd ki bī dūst
har sharbat-i ʿadhbam ki dihī ʿayn-i ʿadhāb ast

Even if it is the wine of paradise drop it, for without love
Even the most pleasant wine is nothing but (*ʿayn*)
torture[43]

On one level, the second hemistich means that in such circumstances an otherwise pleasant drink is pleasant only while in the "court" of the beloved. But the letter *ʿayn* also happens to be the first letter in the subsequent word (*ʿadhāb*), its source or starting point. The letter *ʿayn* is literally the source (*ʿayn*) of torture, the point from which it begins. By the same logic, however, it is also the source of the purported opposite, *ʿadhb* (dulcet) earlier in the same line. This of course is a wonderful example of an incomplete homonymy (*jināS-i nāqiṣ*). "Without love," says Ḥāfiẓ, the two are indistinguishable, their origins obscured like the beloved's tress of hair before Ḥāfiẓ reveals it as a *jīm*.

Dar Kaʿba-yi kū-yi tu har ān kas ki biyāyad
az qibla-yi abrū-yi tu dar ʿayn-i namāzast

Whosoever comes to the *kaʿba* of your lane
Is in the eye (*ʿayn*) of prayer through the qibla (direction of prayer) of your eyebrow[44]

Here the beloved occupies the place of the *kaʿba*, around which the faithful worship. The eyebrow (*abrū*) is compared to the *qibla*—the direction of Mecca—toward which a Muslim faces while praying. Presumably arched, this eyebrow can also suggest that the route to salvation is indirect. The features of the face guide the faithful, focusing their worship toward the beloved. But again we have an ambiguous *ʿayn*. The Arabic reading of "eye" recalls the striking image of pilgrims performing *ṭavāf* (circling around) the black-clad *kaʿba*, like the black pupil of an eye drawing in those caught in its gaze. This in turn resembles the "eye" at the center of a storm, and the curvature of the letter *ʿayn* itself.

There is a further pun on an additional meaning of *ʿayn* in Persian: "selfsame" or "like." Since visiting this holy site is considered an indispensable duty (*vājib*) for every Muslim, being in the presence of the beloved is here elevated to that same incumbent level. Here the "prayer" of the pious, performed by standing before the beloved, is not simply similar to or an approximation of real prayer, but rather equivalent to conventional prostration: love and the appreciation of beauty have no less value than literal prayer.

The eyebrow is itself another token feature of the beloved in Persian lyric poetry, and other poets before Ḥāfiẓ had likened it to the *qibla* and love to a religious act. Sanā'ī says:

> *Tu az miyān-i du abrū hizār qibla bisāzī*
>
> From between two eyebrows, you build a thousand *qiblas*[45]

But like the *mīm*-like mouth and *jīm*-like *zulf*, a part of the eyebrow's appeal not mentioned by Sana'i was its visual affinity with the written word. Schimmel writes, "The curved eyebrows were usually compared to a beautifully written tughra, as found at the beginning of official letters."[46] By framing the eyebrow as part of the "*ʿayn* of namāz," with all the visual and other puns on *ʿayn*, Ḥāfiẓ emphasizes equivalence over affinity. One need not choose between contrasting meanings because they converge on the same point.

The final letter in Ḥāfiẓ's repertoire is *qāf*. The word gives its name to sura 50 of the Koran, which speaks of the creation of mountains, and, in Islamic theology, to the name of a mountain that encircles

the earth. In Persian folklore, *Qāf* is the mountain where the mythical phoenix (*sīmurgh*) lives.[47]

Zi chashm-i ʿishq tavān dīd shāhid-i ghayb
ki nūr-i dīda-yi ʿāshiq zi Qāf tā Qāf ast

From the eye of love, one can see the face of the absent beloved
for the light of the lover's gaze stretches from *Qāf* to *Qāf*[48]

The expression "from *Qāf* to *Qāf*" simultaneously indicates stasis and movement. It might be translated as "around the world," suggesting that the speaker traverses everything encompassed in a single circuit of the world's diameter if one departs from and finishes at the same given point. In this reading, the light of the lover's gaze illuminates the entire world, and enables the speaker to picture his beloved even from far away.

Such a circular journey also recalls ʿAṭṭār's *Conference of the Birds*. In that poem, as in the case of Ḥāfiẓ's speaker, the birds seek union with an absent object of desire, the phoenix, which was thought to live on Mount Qāf. Ultimately the birds (thirty remained of the many more that set out on the arduous journey) realize that they together compose the legendary creature, whose name translates as "thirty birds." Like Ḥāfiẓ's beloved, oblivious to the peculiar beauty of their *jīm* tresses, the birds failed to recognize themselves reflected in language until prompted. "From *Qāf* to *Qāf*" expresses well this concept of an enlightened return to a point of origin. The lover's gaze, says Ḥāfiẓ, can traverse such a treacherous path in an instant, and those who understand it are always aware that absence and presence are intertwined. As ʿAṭṭār says,

The phoenix's shadow and Himself are one;
Seek them together, twinned in unison.[49]

Conclusion

Ḥāfiẓ's use of individual letters can be summed up in his use of the word letter (*ḥarf*) itself. In the original Arabic, the word specifically means "letter," as in a letter of the alphabet. In Persian, it retains

this meaning, but also means a larger word (*kalima*) or utterance (*sukhan*), as in the verb "to talk" (*ḥarf zadan*).[50]

Āsāyish-i du gītī taqṣīr-i īn du ḥarf ast
bā dūstān muruvvat bā dushmanān mudārā

The tranquility of the two worlds lies in these two
utterances (*ḥarf*):
chivalry with friends; tolerance with enemies.
(Ghazal 5)[51]

Yak ḥarf-i ṣūfiyāna bigūyam ijāzatast:
ay nūr-i dīda, ṣulḥ bih az jang u dāvarī

Let me say one Sufi phrase (*ḥarf*), with your permission:
O light of the eye, peace is better than war and
judgment.
(Ghazal 451)[52]

In both of the above examples, each *ḥarf* clearly means a phrase or utterance, not a single letter of the alphabet. But Ḥāfiẓ elsewhere plays with its dual meaning of singularity and multiplicity. We have already seen his plea, "What can I do? My master taught me no other letter (*ḥarf*) [but *alif*]" (ghazal 317), and discussed how he learned this single letter precisely because it was generative of others, capable of expressing things far greater than a single vertical line. Likewise in ghazal 171,

Īn sharḥ-i bīnihāyat kaz zulf-i yār guftand
ḥarfist az hizārān kandar ʿibārat āmad

This endless description that they gave of the beloved
Is but one *ḥarf* out of thousands enclosed within it.[53]

The "description" consists of a single *ḥarf* (letter, word, utterance), yet is "endless." Like the *alif* branded on Ḥāfiẓ's heart by his master, the paradox holds only because its singularity contains within it the potential for multiplicity. The second hemistich encapsulates this Möbius-strip logic in its syntax. The idea of one out of thousands

suggests parity between each *ḥarf*. But at the same time, those thousands are subsumed within a single *ḥarf*.

The same could be said about each of the individual letters in this discussion. Though they may appear to be isolated characters, Ḥāfiẓ invokes then reconciles their myriad meanings before the reader's eyes.

With abjad, he invites readers to seek fresh meaning in a sentence they may have only superficially understood, without discrediting the initial reading. With *jīm*, he stops us in our tracks with a challenge to recognize what makes the beloved beautiful, then dissects it through the letter's geometry. He celebrates the beloved's affinity to *alif* not only because of its beautiful shape, but also because of its capacity as an archetype initial, standalone figure to generate other letters. This generative capacity dislodges "rival" tropes such as the cedar tree, which is framed as a mere derivative of the alphabet rather than the stable point of comparison that its prominence in lyric poetry assumes.

He plays on *ʿayn*'s meaning of "source" through puns, flagging the letter's value as the origin of meanings so divergent that they can appear to be opposites (*ʿadhb* and *ʿadhāb*) to eyes uninitiated in the ways of love. With *Qāf*, he invokes its affiliations to the phoenix story and the blurring of absence and presence, to reconcile separation from the beloved with the very immediate intensity of feeling that it induces. Ḥāfiẓ's mastery is more than an exercise in word play or an intertextual homage to established lyrical tropes. It is a way to realize the dual desire of proximity to the beloved and to God because the alphabet is a language common to both, and the one reflected in the other.

Patrick Sykes is an independent researcher based in London. He studied English literature at the University of Cambridge, then Turkish and Persian in Istanbul and Tehran. He holds a master of arts from Bogazici University in Turkey, and is the author of "Denaturalization and Conceptions of Citizenship in the 'War on Terror'" (2015), in *Citizenship Studies*.

NOTES

1. On wine, see Ali Saeidi and Tim Unwin, "Persian Wine Tradition and Symbolism: Evidence from the Medieval Poetry of Hafiz," *Journal of Wine Research* 15, no. 2 (August 1, 2004): 97–114. On trees, see Fatemeh Mosazadeh-Sayadmahaleh, Yusef Esmaeilzadeh-Estakhrbijar, and Ghassem

Habibi Bibalani, "Roles of Cypress in Poems by Hafez," *International Journal of Academic Research* 3, no. 1 (January 2011): 322–27. On the morning wind, see Annemarie Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 201–16. On gardens, see Julie Scott Meisami, "Allegorical Gardens in the Persian Poetic Tradition: Nezami, Rumi, Hafez," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17, no. 2 (May 1985): 229–60.

2. Quoted in ʿAlīriḍā Ḥājiyān-Nizhād, "Nawʿī tashbīh dar adab-i fārsī (tashbīh-i ḥurūfī) [Forms of Comparison in the Persian Tradition (Letter Imagery)]," *Majalla-yi dānishkada-yi adabiyāt va ʿulūm-i insānī* 160, no. 982 (Winter 2002/1380): 389.

3. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 412.

4. In Leonard Lewisohn, ed., *Hafiz and the Religion of Love in Classical Persian Poetry*, International Library of Iranian Studies 25 (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 83.

5. Lewisohn, *Hafiz and the Religion of Love*, 11.

6. On Ḥāfiẓ and Sufism, see Charles Henri de Fouchecour in Lewisohn, *Hafiz and the Religion of Love*, 143–57.

7. In Michael Glunz and J. Christoph Burgel, eds., *Intoxication, Earthly and Heavenly: Seven Studies on the Poet Hafiz of Shiraz*, vol. 12, bd. 12 (Bern: Peter Lang, 1991), 8–39.

8. www.ganjoor.net.

9. Unless otherwise stated, quotations from Ḥāfiẓ are taken from Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ-i Shīrāzī, *Dīvān-i Ḥāfiẓ* [The Divan of Ḥāfiẓ], ed. Manṣūr Jahāngīr and Muḥammad Qazvīnī (Tehran: Dawrān, Dīdār, 2001). All translations are by the author.

10. Riccardo Zipoli, "The Technique of the Javab: Replies by Nawa'i to Hafiz and Gami," *Eurasiatica* 35 (December 1993): 5.

11. On the unity of the ghazal, see Frances W. Pritchett, "Orient Pearls Unstrung: The Quest for Unity in the Ghazal," *Edebiyat* NS 4 (1993): 119–35, and Michael Craig Hillmann, "Hafez and Poetic Unity through Verse Rhythms," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 31, no. 1 (January 1972): 1–10.

12. Quoted in Ādīb Ṭūsī, "Muqayisa bayn-i shiʿr-i Saʿdī va Ḥāfiẓ [A Comparison of the Poetry of Saʿdi with that of Hāfiz]," *Vaḥīd* 92, no. 9 (Mordad 1971/1351): 676.

13. J. T. P. de Bruijn, "Hafez's Poetic Art," in *Encyclopedia Iranica* (2002), http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hafez-iii.

14. Lewisohn, *Hafiz and the Religion of Love*, 11–12.

15. Mihdī Bāqirī, "Chigūnigī-yi taṣvīrsāzī bā ḥurūf-i alifbā dar shiʿr-i shāʿirān-i sunnatī" [Kinds of Imagery with the Letters of the Alphabet in the Poetry of Traditional Poets], *Kitābmāh-i adabiyāt* 50, no. 164 (Khordad 1390/2011): 44–51.

16. Yaḥya Maʿrūf, "Taghazzul bā bahrigīrī az ḥurūf-i alifbā dar shiʿr-i fārsī va ʿarabī" [Ghazal-Writing with Use of the Letters of the Alphabet in Persian

and Arabic Literature], *Zabān va adabiyāt-i ʻarabī* 1, no. 2/2/165 (Spring/Summer 1389/2010): 119–45.

17. Khujandī, quoted in Bāqirī, "Chigūnigī-yi," 49.

18. Rumi, quoted in Maʿrūf, "Taghazzul," 132.

19. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 411–25.

20. Ḥājiyān-Nizhād, "Nawʿī tashbīh," 401.

21. Bāqirī, "Chigūnigī-yi," 45.

22. Cf. *Ān zulf hamchow dāl bibīn bar kinār-i dil*, from ghazal 721.

23. Ibn ʿArabī (1165–1240), for example, inferred that if Arabic was God's language, it must also have been the language with which he brought the world into existence (see Michael Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy in Al-Andalus: Ibn Masarra, Ibn Al-'Arabi and the Isma'ili Tradition* [Leiden: Brill, 2014]). Besides a philosopher, Ibn ʿArabī was of course also a lyric poet who used letter symbolism in his own work. For more on letterism in Arabic poetry, in particular the *muʿashsharāt* genre and the poetry of Ibn ʿArabī, see also Denis Enrico McAuley, *Ibn ʿArabi's Mystical Poetics*, Oxford Oriental Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

24. Martin Nguyen, "Exegesis of the Ḥurūf Al-Muqaṭṭaʿa: Polyvalency in Sunnī Traditions of Qurʿanic Interpretation," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 14, no. 2 (2012): 1–28.

25. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 411.

26. *Ḥāfiẓ* is an Arabic word meaning protector or guardian, used also as a moniker for someone who has memorized the Koran.

27. See Nguyen, "Exegesis of the Ḥurūf Al-Muqaṭṭaʿa," 14–15, on the surah known as *qāf*.

28. For more on hurufism, see Kathleen R. F. Burrill, *The Quatrains of Nesimi: Fourteenth-Century Turkic Hurufi* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972); H. Algar, "Astarabadi, Fazlallah," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (1987), http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/astarabadi-fazlallah-sehab-al-din-b; Orkhan Mir-Kasimov, *Words of Power: Ḥurufi Teachings between Shi'ism and Sufism in Medieval Islam: The Original Doctrine of Fadl Allah Astarabadi*, Shi'i Heritage Series 3 (London : I.B. Tauris, 2015); Edward Granville Browne, *Some Notes on the Literature and Doctrines of the Hurufi Sect* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1898).

29. Abdelhamid Saleh Hamdan, "Ghazali and the Science of Ḥurūf," *Oriente Moderno* 4, no. 65 (December 1985): 191–93, 191.

30. For a brief history of chronograms in Persian texts, see J. T. P. de Bruijn, "Chronograms," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (December 15, 1991), http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/chronograms-pers. These indirect date references were based on the Arabic *abjad*, an arrangement of the alphabet's twenty-eight letters in eight meaningless words—the first of which is "abjad"—that were used as mnemonics to recall their order from the value of 1 (*alif*) to 1,000 (*ghayn*) (for the full list of values, see G. Krotkoff, "Abjad," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* [December 15, 1982], http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/abjad). A rival arrangement was "abtath," which again takes its name from the first mnemonic (for a comparison of the two systems,

see George P. Taylor, *Coins of Tipu Sultan* [Asian Educational Services, 1989], 15–16). *Abjad* was used to encode numerical information such as dates in the form of words for use in "administrative documents, in literary and scientific texts, on dated coins, and on monuments." See Stephen Chrisomalis, *Numerical Notation: A Comparative History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 165. Rodgers surveys their use in Persian poetry and notes the few equivalent examples of the device in English, while Vil'čevskij and Clinton focus on Khāqānī (d. 1199). See also C. L. Rodgers, "Tārīkhs or Eastern Chronograms," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (October 1898): 715–39; O. L. Vil'čevskij and Jerome W. Clinton, "The Chronograms of Khaqani," *Iranian Studies* 2, nos. 2/3 (Spring–Summer 1969): 97–105. Perhaps the most famous *abjad* associated with Ḥāfiẓ is not one from his own *dīvān* but the "khāk-i muṣallā" inscribed on his grave in Shiraz. A quatrain invites visitors to deduce the date of his death from the phase, which superficially references the dome-like structure under which he rests but whose letters also form the date 791 (1389) when summed (Edward Granville Browne, *A History of Persian Literature: Under Tartar Dominion (A.D. 1265–1502)*, Literary History of Persia 3 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920], 283). On the use of *abjad* for recording dates in poetry, including Ḥāfiẓ, see also Shukrullāh Shīvan, "Abjadsarā'ī-yi Ḥāfiẓ-i shīrāzī" [The abjad-utterings of Ḥāfiẓ of Shiraz], *Afghānistān-i Āzād*, January 29, 2011; and Dāvūd Niẓām-Bihrūz and Maḥmūd Ṣalavātī, "ʿIlal-i rūikard-i shāʿirān bi ḥisāb-i jamāl, mādda-yi tārīkh, muʿammā va lughaz dar shʿir-i fārsī va rābita-yi ān bā ʿilm-i riyāḍī" [Reasons Behind Poets' Approach to Sentence Calculation, chronograms and Mystery in Persian Poetry, and Its Relation to Mathematics], *Zībāshināsī-yi adabī* 4, no. 15 (Summer 2013/1392): 101–22.

31. Burrill, *Quatrains of Nesimi*, 23.

32. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 413.

33. See Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 417–18, on the most prominent thinkers to have engaged with *alif*.

34. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 417.

35. Quoted in Annemarie Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, Hagop Kevorkian Series on Near Eastern Art and Civilization (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 93.

36. Qiṭʿa 3, Ganjoor, https://ganjoor.net/hafez/ghete/sh3/.

37. Qiṭʿa 19, Ganjoor, https://ganjoor.net/hafez/ghete/sh19/.

38. Ḥāfiẓ, *Dīvān,* 216.

39. Ḥāfiẓ, *Dīvān*, 73.

40. See Attar: *sarv chūn qadd-i kharāmān-i tu nīst* / The cedar is nothing like your graceful stature (ghazal 116). https://ganjoor.net/attar/divana/ghazal-attar/sh116/.

41. Ḥāfiẓ, *Dīvān*, 73.

42. Ḥāfiẓ, *Dīvān*, 248.

43. Ḥāfiẓ, *Dīvān*, 23.

44. Ḥāfiẓ, *Dīvān*, 31.

45. Sana'i, ghazal 416. Ganjoor, https://ganjoor.net/sanaee/divans/ghazal-sanaee/sh416/.

46. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 413. The *ṭughrā* is usually associated with Ottoman sultans but goes back at least as far as the Seljuks. See M. Houtsma et al., eds., *E.J. Brill's First Encyclopaedia of Islam 1913–1936* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 822.

47. On the Sīmurgh's significance in Iranian culture, see Hanns-Peter Schmidt, "The Semurw: Of Birds and Dogs and Bats," *Persica* 9 (1980): 1–85.

48. Attributed poems, no. 3. Ganjoor, https://ganjoor.net/hafez/montasab/sh3/.

49. Farid al-Din ʿAttar, *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. Dick Davis and Afkham Darbandi (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 54.

50. See Muʿīn's dictionary, which, after the singular "letter" ("*har yik az vāhidhā-yi alifbā*"), defines *ḥarf* as "speech" (*ṣukhan*) and "discourse" (*guftār*). Muḥammad Muʿīn, "ḥarf [letter]," in *Farhang-i fārsī: (mutavassiṭ)* [Muʿīn Encyclopedic Dictionary] (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1963), 1347.

51. Ḥāfiẓ, *Dīvān*, 8.

52. Ḥāfiẓ, *Dīvān*, 290.

53. Ḥāfiẓ, *Dīvān*, 113.