

Translating Esotericism: Early Modern Persian

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That is at bottom the only courage that is demanded of us: to have the courage for the most strange, the most singular and the most inexplicable that we may encounter.

Rainer Maria Rilke¹

The entries below are chosen for their particular salience across the vast Persian cosmopolis, one of the largest in history: spanning from the Eastern Mediterranean to Southeast Asia and the gates of China, it encompassed a full third of the human race for most of the last millennium.² They draw on terms of art in Persian and Arabic, the two primary scholarly and literary languages of this cosmopolis, which both preserved their “classical” Arabic significations and extended them in creative new directions to reflect local practice. And it is through Persian, not Arabic, that these terms entered vernaculars like Turkish, Urdu, Bengali and Malay, where they underwent further adaptation, especially under colonialism. Persian was likewise the language of choice for early modern translations of Sanskrit and Chinese classics. What follows reflects the range of Persianate precolonial usages – many of them postcolonial too – as a basis for global comparative study.

1. *Letters to a Young Poet*, 67.

2. On this cosmopolis – occult or otherwise – see Kia, *Persianate Selves*; Pickett, *Polymaths of Islam*.

Occult, occult science, occultism

There is no such thing as Islamic occultism – much less Islamic esotericism – if the existence of a cultural phenomenon can only be proven by the existence of a corresponding emic term, which both Arabic and Persian lack.³ This is in extreme contrast to the stable emic category most naturally translated in English as “occult,” which enjoyed hegemony throughout the early modern Persianate world. Ubiquitous across disciplines, genres and modes of life, it was expressed most frequently by the Arabo-Persian adjectives *khafī* (occult, hidden) and *bāṭin* (inward, nonmanifest) and the noun *ghayb* (the unseen), all defined in relation to the adjectives *jalī* and *ẓāhir* (manifest) and the noun *shahāda* (the seen). This binary – representing the cosmic marriage of opposites, like Yin and Yang – stems from the divine nature itself as defined in the Quran: *He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Occult* (Q 57:3).

In more technical usage, such terms came to designate a coherent subset of the natural and mathematical sciences, and increasingly some religious ones too: the *‘ulūm khafīyya*, or occult sciences. Depending on the scholar, these included everything from astrology and alchemy to geomancy and oneiromancy, and sometimes even medicine and agriculture. What linked such multifarious disciplines was a common epistemic principle: an occult science is a technology whereby one extrapolates from visible to nonvisible data, as with divination, or harnesses extraphysical forces to act on the physical realm, as with magic. Thus the classic Persianate definition of talismanry: the connection of nonvisible celestial forces to visible terrestrial objects through intention and ritual to prompt physical changes in the world.

Needless to say, the manifest vs. occult binary that defines all of Islamicate and Persianate natural, mathematical and religious science does not occupy the same semantic field in modern academic English, which uses “occult” primarily as a slur, while being perfectly comfortable with neologistic prefixes like “dark”

3. In the partially successful attempt to purge its Persianate past, Modern Turkish “okültizm” was adapted from French as a secularizing polemic against Islamic “superstition,” so may be safely disregarded here.

(as in dark matter, dark energy) or “sub-” (as in subconscious, subatomic) as a neutral means of designating the nonvisible. Even more problematic is the equivalent binary of mind vs. matter, or spirit (*rūḥ*) vs. body (*jism*), as Persianate sources put it. For most early modern Muslim thinkers, the occult sciences consist of those sciences in which mind, or mathematical-linguistic information, is considered the key to the manipulation and transformation of matter – or of other minds. That is, they focus on mind-matter and mind-mind interactions. While “mind” remains a problematic category in English especially, with most of its premodern connections to Greek *noûs* long since severed, this etic definition of the “Islamic occult” not as “religious belief” but as “information science” more accurately reflects emic usage, and is hence more likely to be productive for comparative study going forward.

We may therefore speak of “Islamic occult science” as an extremely robust emic and etic category alike, legitimating “Islamic occultism” as an etic category firmly rooted in several seminal emic terms. That the latter is reminiscent of the nineteenth-century French coinage *occultisme* does not hinder its historiographical use in English, but rather helps it, since this term was designed to rehabilitate the occult sciences as a retort to colonialist Enlightenment polemic, and practitioners continue to identify with it freely. By contrast, Islamicists still find themselves trammled by the same nineteenth-century polemic due to the orientalist genetics of their field; the specifically Islamic occult continues to be dismissed by historians of science as the “superstition of the natives” even now, formally on a par with African and Native American “animism.” A convenient English term of valorization is necessary to communicate the generally scientifically and religiously unproblematic and entirely mainstream nature of Islamic occultism.

Similarly, the English term “esotericism” – used most often synonymously with “mysticism,” occasionally with “occultism” – is both problematic and potentially useful. Its twentieth-century Traditionalist or anti-modern religionist associations aside, the rules of Arabic grammar and the venerable tradition of

Islamic heresiography both forbid it from being a substantive in the Modern English sense: *bāṭiniyya* (esotericists) was strictly a polemical designation of Ismaʿili Shiʿis by Sunni scholars, and never adopted in a positive sense by any known premodern Islamic group. Following the same grammatical principle, however, partisans of the *bāṭin* are legion. Some of them championed the occult openly, and others much more privately. In earlier Arabic manuals of various occult sciences, indeed, which constantly exhort the reader to hide their contents from the unworthy lest social chaos ensue, authors were at pains to make their works accessible only to initiates by relying heavily on esotericizing textual techniques like *tabdīd al-ʿilm*, scattering knowledge across a body of work. This gave rise to what are best termed “esotericist reading communities,” which pursued the study of occult sciences secretly.⁴ Such a definition accords with popular American English usage too: I often poll my undergraduate students on the descriptors “occult” and “esoteric,” and they routinely associate the first with “magic” and the second with “secrecy.” Since the “de-esotericization of occultism” is a defining feature of early modernity, in the Persianate world as in the Latinate, I propose that we pragmatically rehabilitate “occult” as an epistemological category and “esoteric” as a sociological one for comparative purposes going forward.⁵

Weird, wonder, trauma

In early modern Persianate usage, and in Persian to this day, by far the most common descriptor for the occult sciences — *ʿulūm-i gharīb* — is in fact not *khafī*, occult, but rather *gharīb*, weird and wondrous. That is, the occult sciences are precisely those natural, mathematical and religious disciplines, technically difficult and hence rarely mastered (another sense of *gharīb*), that induce wonder by scientifically investigating and technologically harnessing the weird. To put it into more technical modern English parlance, they are the sciences of the paranormal, currently relegated to the still marginal academic field of parapsychology.

4. Gardiner, “Esotericism in a Manuscript Culture.”

5. Melvin-Koushki, “Is (Islamic) Occult Science Science?”

But as the last century and a half of empirical parapsychological and anthropological research has shown, experience of the paranormal is entirely normal in all human populations, even the most secular, and regardless of level of education.⁶ It is in this sense that early modern Persianate Muslims dubbed these the *weird sciences* – with one caveat: wonder-inducing weirdness was never to be avoided, but always sought out as an *ethical imperative*.⁷ (The broader semantic range of Old English *nyrd* as fate, destiny, enchantment, soothsaying, an omen, the supernatural and the uncanny – and by extension anything that happens – is here more relevant than its truncated Modern English descendant.) This imperative is enshrined in the robust Arabo-Persian scientific-literary genre dedicated to it, *‘ajā’ib al-makhlūqāt*, wonders of creation (or: weird creatures), and likewise in Persianate poetry and arts of the book, whose aesthetic effect often pivots on the concept of *ta‘ajjub*, wonder, symbolized by a finger to the mouth. Even the grotesque demons and genies that populate Persianate paintings are designed to excite neither disgust nor fear, but rather reverent wonder at the infinite marvels of divine creation. Such aberrations are not *evil*, just delightfully, titillatingly, instructively *weird*.

This pits early modern Persianate ethics against those of modern Euro-American academia, defined not by wonder and a lust for the weird but by a patronizing hermeneutics of suspicion. “Paranormal,” like “occult,” is often used as a slur by anglophone academic nonpractitioners, and embraced as a subversive badge of pride by self-designated occultists. Such a neat divorce of elite from popular is irrelevant to most premodern contexts, however, especially the Persianate, where the occult, the weird and the wondrous sciences never became rejected knowledge, and witchhunts were simply inconceivable.⁸

At the same time, the Persianate valorization of the weird was not meant to make it less discomfiting, dangerous, or possibly even fatal. To the contrary,

6. See e.g. Radin, *Real Magic*; Doostdar, *The Iranian Metaphysicals*; Taneja, *Jinnealogy*.

7. Zadeh, *Wonders and Rarities*; cf. Davis, *High Weirdness*, 1–41; Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, 139.

8. Melvin-Koushki, “*How to Rule the World*”; cf. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*.

it was embraced as a site of *trauma*.⁹ Many occult sciences, as well as most Sufi practice, thus explicitly rely on various modes of artificially induced trauma, all designed to promote altered states of consciousness in the practitioner. As virtually every early modern Persian and Arabic grimoire details, more complex occult-scientific operations require fasting, prayer, isolation, vigil, a vegan diet and ritual purity at all times, for days, weeks, months or even years on end. If any of these and other strenuous conditions are not perfectly met, the operation is guaranteed to fail.¹⁰ Alchemy is a case in point: it is only by traumatizing mind and matter simultaneously that the secrets of matter can be unlocked and natural processes manipulated. (Compare the modern laboratory as an artificial trauma chamber too.) Similarly, the Socratic-Sufi dictum “die before you die” was no mere poetic turn of phrase, but understood in a technical, programmatic sense. The induction of out-of-body and near-death experiences likewise remained central to the practice of Neoplatonic philosophy throughout the early modern Persianate world, where accounts of ritual and visionary ascent abound.¹¹

Magic, sorcery, enchantment

There is no magic (*sihr*) in Islam, as Muslim puritans past and present have always declared, and its scriptural sources make pellucidly clear. Yet the same sources assert its scientific reality, however dangerous and illegal. Indeed, the last two suras of the Quran itself are designed and used ubiquitously as magical defenses against magic!

This creative tension is encapsulated in the semantic range of *sihr* itself. In the classic definition of the great Egyptian lexicographer and chancery official Ibn Manẓūr (d. 1312), magic is “turning something into other than its proper state,” and hence encompasses everything from intercourse with demons, illusionism and enchantment to the power of poetry and eloquence; the latter

9. This theme has been especially developed by Jeffrey Kripal; see e.g. his *Secret Body*.

10. For a comprehensive list of ritual prerequisites see Melvin-Koushki, “Qizilbash Magic.”

11. These continue pre-Mongol Islamic precedent, on which see Piątak, “Philosophy, Mysticism and Magic”; Noble, *Philosophising the Occult*.

is paradoxically called “licit magic” (*siḥr ḥalāl*). This conceptual continuity is driven by the core tenet that reality is *linguistic* – hence magic as weaponized *metaphor* for the captivation of minds both illegally (sorcery) and legally (poetry).¹²

With such seminal precedent, early modern Persianate discourses on magic diverged rather sharply from contemporary Latinate debates, which were often, ironically, obsessed with its *Persianness*. In Persian and Arabic encyclopedias of the sciences, by contrast, which ignore earlier injunctions against its practice, *siḥr* (Pers. *jādū*) has no special connection to Iran, but appears almost exclusively as a perfectly legal and indispensable Hellenistic natural science. Even certain puritan scholars less than happy at this legalization of “sorcery” were at pains to paint it as a real but foreign (*gharīb*), especially “Hindu,” phenomenon – one best countered by quranic divine-names *talismanry*. This shift represents both the intervening rise to hegemony of lettrism (*‘ilm al-ḥurūf*) and a reinscribing of the Quran as anti-magic magic.

Equally hegemonic in Persianate culture was the equation of lettrist talismanry with love magic, both as a scientific basis for imperial ideology and as the backbone of the romance genre in Persian and Persianate vernaculars like Urdu through the nineteenth century.¹³ Here the positive sense of magic as both poetic and actual enchantment comes into full force. Thus for most early modern Muslims, and many modern Muslims too, “disenchantment” can only be an act of unspeakable epistemic and aesthetic violence. To disenchant is to depoeticize, is to empty the world of metaphorical and scientific meaning, is to destroy the possibility of wonder. Despite the ruptures wrought by European and Russian colonialism in the Persianate world, therefore, modern technologies like automatic weapons, the telegraph and the internet were and continue to be conceived of in terms of occult science too.

West vs. East

If we define Western culture as a product of the late-antique Hellenic-Abrahamic dialectic, Islam has been the greater part of the West for most of the last

12. Selove, “Magic as Poetry.”

13. Khan, *The Broken Spell*.

millennium, in terms of political and economic power and cultural production alike. It spread that dialectic over a vaster and more populous part of the Afro-Eurasian ecumene than did Christianity and Judaism combined. Premodern and modern polemics aside, the West is therefore best defined as the half of Afro-Eurasia incorporating the Arabic, Persian, Greek and Latin cosmopolises, that vast realm where Hellenic-Abrahamic dialectics reigned supreme, and philosophy came to be pursued in mathematical-linguistic terms. To the extent that Southeast Asia was incorporated into this dialectic, it too may be considered Western.¹⁴

In the early modern Persianate context, however, in contrast to modern English usage, “East” (*mashriq*) and “West” (*maghrib*) were primarily relativistic geographical descriptors, and entirely contiguous. Eastern, Persianate occultism remained closely tied to Western, Mediterranean developments. This was particularly so with respect to hegemonic sciences like lettrism, alchemy and geomancy, which became primary vehicles for the experimentalist practice of Neoplatonic-Neopythagorean philosophy throughout the early modern “East.” That philosophy became in turn the primary vector for absorbing and transforming farther Eastern (Indic and Chinese) texts into Western ones too, much as Theosophy was to do two centuries later.¹⁵ As a case in point, the Sanskrit Upanishads were translated into Persian under the Mughal imperial aegis, to prove their status as the ultimate ancient Eastern expression of Western Hellenic-Abrahamic monotheism – and the Arabic Quran’s status as their modern epitome.¹⁶ Similarly, Chinese Daoist classics were translated into Persian, not Arabic, using standard Sufi terminology worked out between East and West.¹⁷ By the same token, Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240), the Andalusian Doctor Maximus, who famously declared “West is best,” enjoyed

14. For references see Melvin-Koushki, “*Tahqīq* vs. *Taqīd*.” It must be emphasized that, contrary to the impression given by most of modern historiography, fully two-thirds of the human race (roughly 500 million souls) were either Muslim or lived in a Muslim state in the early modern era, and the hallowed names Plato, Pythagoras and Plotinus (as Aristotle) invoked far more often in Arabic and Persian than Latin and Greek.

15. Strube, *Global Tantra*.

16. Gandhi, *The Emperor*, ch. 8.

17. Murata, *Chinese Gleams*.

far more influence in the Persianate East: there his thought was definitively synthesized with Suhrawardī's (d. 1191) Enlightenment philosophy — pivoting on the symbol of “light from the mystic orient” and the practice of planetary prayer — to become the dominant form of early modern Neoplatonism.¹⁸

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18. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood*, 163; Walbridge, *Wisdom of the Mystic East*.

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