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Of love and longing : a study of Ayatollah Khomeini's mystical poetry and its reception in Iran and abroad

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Of Love and Longing

**A Study of Ayatollah Khomeini's Mystical Poetry
and its Reception in Iran and Abroad**

D. Farhosh-van Loon

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Of Love and Longing
A Study of Ayatollah Khomeini's Mystical Poetry
and its Reception in Iran and Abroad

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PREFACE

When I learned that Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, had left a whole collection of mystical poems after his death, the image that I had of this revolutionary Islamic ideologist was changed. After reading several of his poems, which were full of wine motifs and praise of non-conformist Islamic figures, I was captured by the question as to why he would write this poetry, while he severely condemned any form of behaviour dissonant with the ideals of the Islamic Revolution. A couple of years later in 2009, my teacher at Leiden University, Ali Asghar Seyed-Gohrab, stimulated me to apply for a position as a PhD-student in the NWO- project *Of Poetry and Politics: Classical Poetic Concepts in the New Politics of Twentieth-Century Iran*. The topic fascinated me so much that I applied. Also, realizing that this was a unique opportunity to conduct research on Ayatollah Khomeini's complete poetic works (*Divân*), I decided to join the project, bringing to light these personal self-documents by one of the most influential political figures of the twentieth century.

NOTES ON TRANSLATIONS, TRANSLITERATIONS AND FOOTNOTES

In translating and analysing the poems of Ayatollah Khomeini and other Persian poets, I have focused on keeping my translations as close as possible to the original text. I have made no attempt to refine my English translations poetically.

For the transliteration of Persian and Arabic words and names, I have made use of the transliteration table below, except for quoted titles and quotations, where I have remained faithful to the author's original orthography. All Persian and Arabic terms are put in italics except for those that have been Anglicized, such as jihad. I have adopted internationally accepted names, such as Saddam Hussein, while according to my transliteration system it should be Saddâm Hoseyn. For the sake of convenience I have used the term Iran throughout this study, although correctly I should have used the term Persia when it concerns the period before 1934, when the name of the country changed from Persia to Iran. In footnotes, I give a full bibliographical reference for a title at their first occurrence, and in other cases, I give a shortened title.

CONSONANTS

ا	a/e/o	ط	t
ب	b	ظ	z
پ	p	ع	'
ت	t	غ	gh
ث	s	ف	f
ج	j	ق	q
چ	ch	ک	k
ح	h	گ	g
خ	kh	ل	l
د	d	م	m
ذ	dh	ن	n
ر	r	ه	h
ز	z	و	v
ژ	zh	ی	y
س	s		
ش	sh		
ص	s		
ز	z		

VOWELS

Short	اَ	a
	اِ	e
	اُ	o
Long	آ / اِ	â
	و	u
Diphthongs	ی	i
	ی	ey
	و	ow

Organization and Structure of the Book

Many books and articles have been published in European languages on the political career of Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989), and on his Islamic movement, which transformed Iran from a monarchy to an Islamic Republic on April 1st 1979. There has been much less research, especially in the West, into another essential aspect of Ayatollah Khomeini: the role of mysticism in his life. Even fewer studies have been conducted of his poetry, yet these are unique self-documentation, giving a window into his personal thoughts and mystical aspirations.

To my knowledge, the first Western scholar to draw attention to Ayatollah Khomeini's mysticism was Hamid Algar, in his *Islam and Revolution*, in 1981. While focussing on his political career through translations of his most important public speeches, Hamid Algar highlights the mystical aspect of Ayatollah Khomeini's character in this book by translating various mystical lectures by Ayatollah Khomeini, such as his TV appearances in 1979 and 1980, in which he interpreted a Koranic verse from a mystical point of view. In 1988, the same author devoted a whole article entitled "Imam Khomeini, 1902-1906: The Pre-Revolutionary Years" to Ayatollah Khomeini's early mysticism.¹ In 1992, Alexander Knysh published "Irfan Revisited: Khomeini and the Legacy of Islamic Mystical Philosophy," an article in which he tried to demonstrate that Ayatollah Khomeini's worldview was intertwined with Islamic mystico-philosophical thinking (*'erfân*).² A couple of years later, Yahya Bonaud published a scholarly work focused primarily on Ayatollah Khomeini's mysticism, under the title *L'Imam Khomeiny, un Gnostique Méconnu du XXe siècle*.³ In 1999, Johan ter Haar tried to make a connection between Ayatollah Khomeini's mysticism and his interpretation of political leadership in his article "Heiligheid en Politiek Gezag; Het Begrip Wilāyat in de Optiek van Khumayni" (Sanctity and Political Authority: the Concept of Wilāyat in Khomeini's View).⁴ In 2000, Vanessa Martin published *Creating an Islamic state: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran*.⁵ The book offers ample information on Ayatollah Khomeini's

¹ H. Algar, "Imam Khomeini, 1902-1906: The Pre-Revolutionary Years," in *Islam, Politics and Social Movements*, eds. E. Burke and I.M. Lapidus, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, pp. 263-288.

² A. Knysh, "Irfan Revisited: Khomeini and the Legacy of Islamic Mystical Philosophy," in *Middle East Journal*, 46:4, 1992, pp. 631-653.

³ Y.C. Bonaud, *L'Imam Khomeiny: un Gnostique Méconnu du XXe Siècle*, Beyrouth: al-Bouraq, 1995.

⁴ J.G.J. ter Haar, "Heiligheid en Politiek Gezag; Het Begrip Wilāyat in de optiek van Khumayni," in *Mystiek: het andere gezicht van de islam*, eds. M. Buitelaar and J.G.J. ter Haar, Bussum: Coutinho, 1999, pp. 90-102.

⁵ V. Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the making of a new Iran*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2000.

political activities and ideology. Also it provides the reader with abundant information on how his political views were influenced by mystical thoughts. In the context of the relationship between mysticism and a cleric's life, Roy Mottahedeh's *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (2009) is worth reading as the book demonstrates the place of mystical philosophy in the orthodox Shiite milieu of Iran.⁶ Although some of these works, such as Mottahedeh's book, present interesting thoughts on Ayatollah Khomeini's mysticism and its influence on his political career, they do not deal with Ayatollah Khomeini's poetry, although poetry had an important role in his private life and gives insights into his approach to mysticism and to orthodox Shiite doctrines.

While it is about 35 years since the world was first introduced to Ayatollah Khomeini's poetry, surprisingly few Western studies have been conducted on these highly personal documents, which provide access to a side of his character that was heavily influenced by mystical thoughts. To my knowledge, the first Western scholarly response to Ayatollah Khomeini's mystical poetry came from Finn Thiesen in 1991, with a translation of eight of his lyrical poems in his article, "A Draught of Love: A translation of Rūhollāh Xomeini's Sabū ye 'Ešq."⁷ William Hanaway translated and interpreted five of Ayatollah Khomeini's mystical *ghazals*.⁸ In 1999, Baqer Moin responded to Ayatollah Khomeini's poetry, adopting some of his lyrics and trying to demonstrate the importance of his poetry "because it shows how deeply his mysticism is enshrined in his own world of personal experience."⁹ Baqer Moin admits the importance of exploring all aspects of Ayatollah Khomeini's character, the political, the mystical and the jurisprudential, to form a complete image of him. Though Moin refers to these three elements in Ayatollah Khomeini's character, his book contains only a few references to Ayatollah Khomeini's poetry. The first extensive Western study of Ayatollah Khomeini's *Divān* ('collected poetry') was conducted by Benedikt Reinert, with his article "Ḥumainī im Spiegel seiner Gedichte" (2007).¹⁰ In this long article, Reinert comments on a considerable number of Ayatollah Khomeini's poems in three genres: panegyrics, quatrains and lyrical poems. Reinert gives an analysis of various mystical

⁶ R. Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2000.

⁷ F. Thiesen, "A Draught of Love: A translation of Rūhollāh Xomeini's sabū ye 'ešq," in *Corolla Iranica*, eds. R.E. Emmerick and D. Weber, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1991, pp. 211-227.

⁸ W.L. Hanaway, "Five Mystical Ghazals," in *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 30, No ¾, 1997, pp. 273-276.

⁹ See B. Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1999, second print, p. 272.

¹⁰ B. Reinert, "Ḥumainī im Spiegel seiner Gedichte," in *Islamische Grenzen und Grenzübergänge*, Vol. 4, Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2007, pp. 191-293.

topics in these poems and comments on traces of his socio-political thinking in his poetry. Since Reinert has translated a large number of poems by Ayatollah Khomeini, he is able to detect in them a development of Ayatollah Khomeini's political thoughts. Although Reinert comes to interesting conclusions in his article, many topics in Ayatollah Khomeini's poetry collection need further analysis or are unnoticed. In 2011, Asghar Seyed-Gohrab gave an analysis of one of Ayatollah Khomeini's poems, in his "Khomeini the Poet Mystic," focusing on the genre of antinomian mysticism.¹¹ Most recently, Lloyd Ridgeon published a short article entitled "Hidden Khomeini: Mysticism and Poetry," in which he responds to both Ayatollah Khomeini's mystical aspirations and his poetic endeavours.¹² It appears that despite these few Western studies on Ayatollah Khomeini's poetic activities, a thorough analysis of his poetry and the mystical and personal thoughts it reflects is still lacking.¹³

This book will explore Ayatollah Khomeini as a mystical poet, a poet who always wished to be part of a millennium-old Islamic mystical tradition. While Ayatollah Khomeini kept his love for mysticism mostly private, it had an enormous impact on his family, religious and political life. Therefore both his mystical aspiration and his poetic virtuosity must be considered, together with his political ambitions, to form a complete image of Ayatollah Khomeini. The main question of this research is how to interpret Ayatollah Khomeini's mystical poetry. Are these poems the expressions of a convinced mystic, or did he copy this poetic framework for other purposes? Does his early poetry differ from his later work? Is his poetry innovative, or does he confine himself to the classical poetic rules and subject-matters? How does he treat poetic themes and mystical motifs in his poems? How does he adapt them to modern conditions? Do his poems contain personal notes or are they merely poetic constructions without any personal touch? Does his poetry reflect his ideological convictions?

¹¹ See A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, "Khomeini the Poet Mystic," in *Die Welt des Islams*, Vol. 51, Issue ¾, 2011, pp. 438-458.

¹² L. Ridgeon, "Hidden Khomeini: Mysticism and Poetry," in *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini*, ed. A. Adib-Moghaddam, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 193-210.

¹³ Several works in Persian focus on Ayatollah Khomeini's poetic activities, such as *Farhang-e divân-e ash'âr-e emâm Khomeini*, ed. V. Adabiyyat, Tehran: Institute for the Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works, 1372/1993; P. Beygi Habibâbâdi in *Gozide-ye ash'âr: she'r-e jang va defâ'-e moqaddas*, ed. H. Hoseyni, Tehran: Sura, 1381/2002; R. Khomeini, *Reunion with the Beloved: Imam Khomeini's Letters to Hujjat al-Islâm wal-Muslimin Hâj Sayyid Ahmad Khomeini*, Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Work, 1995; R. Khomeini, *The Wine of Love: Mystical Poetry of Imam Khomeini*, transl. and introd. by M. Legenhausen, Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Work, 2003.

How can we connect his poems on wine and love with his public appearance in which he accepted no infringements of Islamic norms? Should they be interpreted literally? And how can we read those poems in which he rejects Islamic institutions, such as the Ka'ba in Mecca? Are such poems related to personal problems he had with Saudi Arabia or are they merely classical metaphors without any personal loading? And finally, how did his followers and opponents respond to his poetry, and why did they respond as they did?

As we will see in the following chapters, some of Ayatollah Khomeini's poetry can be seen as personal documents, others help to understand his political decisions, and several of the poems show his aesthetic evaluation of poetry. The first poem by Ayatollah Khomeini's hand to appear was published by his family in an Iranian journal shortly after his death in 1989. Shortly after this publication, more poems were brought to light, leading to the publication of Ayatollah Khomeini's *Divân* in 1993. Ayatollah Khomeini's *Divân* consists of poems composed before 1936, when he was still a student in the city of Qom, and poems composed after his 1979 return to Iran after 15 years in exile. Ayatollah Khomeini's poetry collection is highly interesting, not only because of its strong mystical loading with topics such as love, wine and eroticism, but also because some poems touch on the war between Iran and Iraq, the political situation in Iran and the relation between Ayatollah Khomeini and his daughter-in-law Fâteme Tabâtabâ'i. The main questions of this thesis revolve around the paradox of Ayatollah Khomeini's convoluted personality, and how his aspirations to worldly power and to mystical sublimation are reflected in his poetry. This study gives an analysis of Ayatollah Khomeini's poetic output, his mysticism and his use of anti-imperialist ideas.

The methodology employed to examine Ayatollah Khomeini's poetry is as follows. In order to produce a thorough analysis of his poetry, I began with a close reading of a number of Ayatollah Khomeini's poems, examining metaphors and imagery. What kind of 'atmosphere' does the poet wish to produce by this imagery? Afterwards I have placed the poems against the background of Ayatollah Khomeini's life and time and related them to the Persian poetic tradition. Persian literature and in particular Persian poetry has been intertwined with mystical thoughts and symbols since the tenth century. Religious ideas and earthly events are usually combined in a Persian poem, in an ambiguous or bivalent way. For example, when a poet composes a poem on love, it could refer to profane love but it also contains elements which point at divine love. A reader of Persian poetry should always be conscious of this double nature in Persian poetry. Aware of the great influence of mysticism on Persian poetry in general and on Ayatollah Khomeini's life in particular, I first placed his poems in a mystical context. I examined whether his poetry can be typified as mystical poetry

or whether he has rather used mystical topics in a profane context. In addition, I placed Ayatollah Khomeini's poems in a literary context, posing questions such as: Did Ayatollah Khomeini confine himself to the literary rules of the poetic genres in which he composed his poetry? How does his poetry relate to his other literary work? Are there traces of intertextuality in Ayatollah Khomeini's poetry? I have also looked at the historical context of each poem, whenever possible, posing questions such as: Are there any textual elements that could have been influenced by contemporary historical or socio-political events, and how does this help us to understand the intended meaning of the poem?

Based on this combination of close reading, and historical, mystical and literary contextualization, I try to give an interpretation, and to answer questions such as: How can unorthodox topics employed by Ayatollah Khomeini be reconciled with his public face, in which he accepted no breaches of Islamic laws and tenets? How can we explain the contradiction between Ayatollah Khomeini's strict Islamic posture in public and these highly personal *carpe diem* messages, mystical ideas and erotic poetry?

To answer these questions and to provide the reader with a thorough analysis of Ayatollah Khomeini's poetry, I have divided this book into six chapters, starting in Chapter one with an introduction to the socio-political situation in Iran from the end of the nineteenth century till recent times. This is necessary to understand the role of Shiite clerics in society, their involvement with politics, and in the social and political arena. This chapter addresses questions such as: What type of political discussions, for example on governance and the dichotomy between church and state, took place amongst the clerics of the period? What role did clerics play during the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911)? How did they respond to the implementation of a constitution in the Iranian political system? To what extent was the clergy politically active before and after the adoption of the Iranian Constitution? How did they respond to the various lucrative economic concessions the Iranian government granted to Great-Britain and Russia during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? Such questions form the backdrop of my analysis in the subsequent chapters. As the positions of the clergy change dramatically during Reza Shah's (1925-1941) reign and later during Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941-1979), an overview of the responses of the most influential clerics of this period to the Pahlavi regime is offered. Clerics also played an important role during the CIA-supported coup of 1953, which removed Premier Mohammad Mosaddeq (d. 1967) from power. Mohammad Reza Shah's modernization campaign, known as the White Revolution, had far-reaching effects on the clergy and their position in society, and many clerics, including Ayatollah Khomeini, protested. Ayatollah Khomeini came on the political scene in

1963, when he openly opposed the Shah's policy, especially his land reforms and women's suffrage. This led to his imprisonment and then exile, which lasted till 1979.

Chapter two contains a biography of Ayatollah Khomeini, with a special focus on the role of mysticism in his life. Attention is given to his studies of the mystical tradition during his time as a student in Qom, and to the philosopher Mollâ Sadrâ (d. 1640) and the mystic Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240), who influenced him. Generally speaking, in Shiite theology, there are two movements: one is very much mystical while the other disapproves of mysticism altogether. Ayatollah Khomeini belonged to the first group, and had to fight the second throughout his life. This being the case, I considered relations between Ayatollah Khomeini and the orthodox clergy, particularly the latter's response to his interest in mysticism. As poetry is a vehicle to express mystical thoughts, part of this chapter is devoted to possible reasons why Ayatollah Khomeini composed poetry. To understand the role of poetry in Iran, it is essential to investigate the role of poetry in Persian society. After this general introduction I focus on the various poetic forms to be found in Ayatollah Khomeini's *Divân*. I will answer questions such as: How and when did Ayatollah Khomeini's poems come to light? When did he write them? What are the most important themes in his poetry?

Chapter three is devoted to Ayatollah Khomeini's quatrains (*robâ'is*). After a general introduction on the Persian *robâ'i*, a representative number of Ayatollah Khomeini's *robâ'is* are analysed, with special attention to biographical elements, in particular his relationship with his daughter-in-law, Fâteme Tabâtabâ'i, with whom Ayatollah Khomeini shared his mystical knowledge. In addition to this biographical data, Ayatollah Khomeini wrote on a wide range of subjects in the *robâ'is* genre, including mystical love, the martyred Mansur Hallâj, death for love (and death in love), the Iran-Iraq war, disparagement of the House of God (the Ka'ba in Mecca), and other unorthodox ideas.

Chapter four deals with the lyrical poems (*ghazals*) Ayatollah Khomeini composed during the 1980s. After a general introduction to this genre in the Iranian poetic tradition, an extensive analysis is offered to show the influence of the medieval Persian poet Hâfez (d. 1389) on Ayatollah Khomeini, demonstrating how Ayatollah Khomeini imitated Hâfez's poetry. Ayatollah Khomeini's *ghazals*, like his *robâ'is*, are permeated with unorthodox motifs such as wine, homo-eroticism, and the praise of other religions, all belonging to the antinomian mystical tradition. To place these poems in a literary and historical context, a discussion on piety and how this is interpreted from a mystical perspective follows.

Chapter five treats four panegyrics (*qasides*) that Ayatollah Khomeini wrote during his early years in Qom. The chapter opens with a historical description of the Persian *qaside*, its

structure and its applications in Iranian culture. This is followed by an analysis of the most important themes in the *qasides*. Special attention is given to the mystical themes in his poems: the mystical path, the Mohammadan light, spiritual perfection, sainthood, etc. The socio-political subjects in Ayatollah Khomeini's *qasides*, such as imperialism, governance, foreign penetration and secularisation, will also be discussed. Ayatollah Khomeini's teacher Abdolkarim Hâ'eri (d. 1936) plays an important role in these *qasides* as well. The analysis which follows focuses on debates on governance within the religious establishment of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Ayatollah Khomeini's *qasides* are interesting since they show a development of his thoughts on governance, and the leading role he allotted to the clergy in the political arena, even in his earlier years. His *qasides* are also interesting because they show how Ayatollah Khomeini mixes socio-political thoughts with mystical doctrines.

The subject of chapter six is the reception of Ayatollah Khomeini's poetry and mysticism, in Iran and abroad. The first response to be considered is a Persian glossary and interpretation, written to contextualize Ayatollah Khomeini's *Divân* in the Islamic mystical tradition, the second is a book entitled *The Wine of Love (Bâde-ye 'eshq)*, translated from Persian into English and commented upon by the American scholar Legenhausen. A supporter of the principles of the Islamic Revolution, Legenhausen elaborates on Ayatollah Khomeini's mystical inclinations, placing Ayatollah Khomeini's poetry in a mystical context.

The second part of chapter six outlines the reception of Ayatollah Khomeini's poetry by Iranians in the diaspora, who wrote parodies and satire on Ayatollah Khomeini. I analysed several poems by the famous Iranian satirist and comedian Hadi Khorsandi, one from before 1979, written in support of Ayatollah Khomeini, and a handful of quatrains in which the poet ridicules Ayatollah Khomeini's personality by parodying one his *ghazals*. Another poem which I have analysed is written by an anonymous poet, in response to the same poem that Khorsandi parodied.