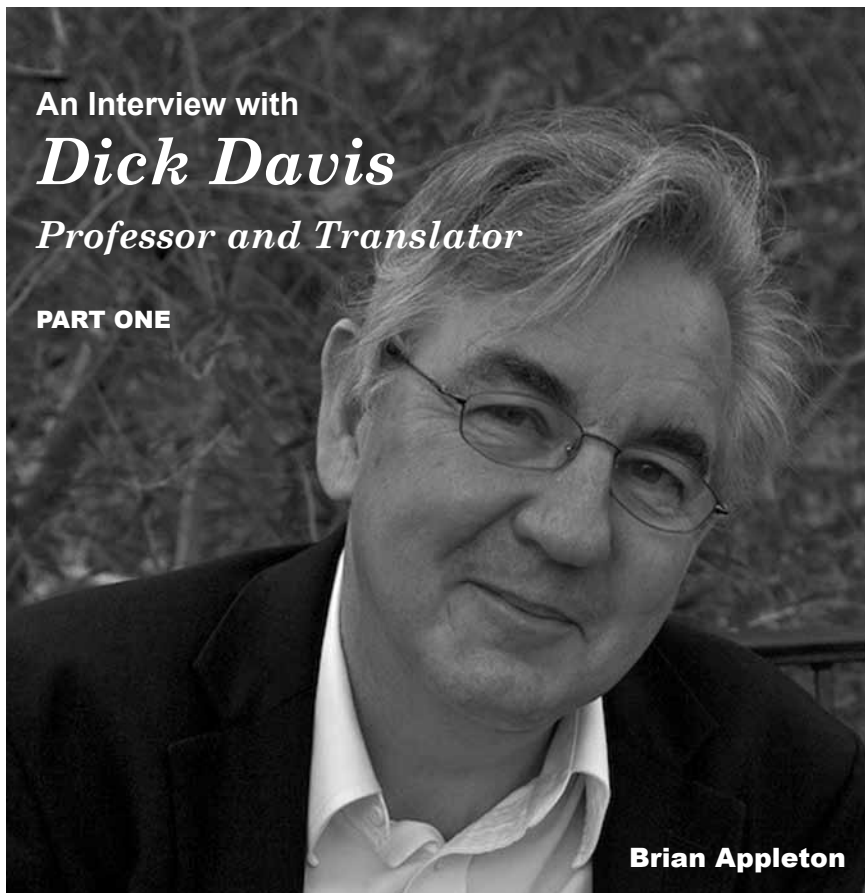


An Interview with  
***Dick Davis***  
*Professor and Translator*

## PART ONE



Brian Appleton

***Tell us about your childhood, perhaps a unique incident or experience that influenced you in your career path and did you have a role model or someone who had a large influence on you? Which of your parents was Italian and where did you grow up?***

I was born in Portsmouth, on the south coast of England, in 1945. We moved around quite a lot when I was young, but I spent much of my childhood and adolescence in Yorkshire, again on the coast. I love the sea, and miss it, living in the mid west as I now do. A very important person in my life was my high school English teacher. It was fairly unthinkable for someone from my kind of background to go to Oxford or Cambridge at that time, but he strongly encouraged me to try, and to my and I think everyone else's astonishment I got a place at King's College, Cambridge. This literally changed my life, mainly by the way it so vastly broadened my sense of life's— in particular my life's— possibilities. I'm still in touch with that

English teacher. His name is John Gibson; he's in his 80s now, and like me he moved to the US. He lives in Indiana, and we see each other once or twice a year. In a way I owe him everything "professional" that has ever happened to me, as those things certainly wouldn't have happened if I hadn't gone to Cambridge, or they wouldn't have happened in the same ways. Obviously I'm extremely grateful to him for all he did for me.

Neither of my parents was Italian. My mother's mother came from near Bellinzona, the border area between Italy and Switzerland, and culturally she was wholly Italian, so my mother was you could say half Italian. My grandmother was brought to England as a teenager to be a chambermaid in a hotel, before the First World War; she was virtually sold in fact, by her parents. It was a sad awful story, and her presence in my childhood was a very dour dark fraught one, through no fault of her own of course. Only after her death did I begin to realize what she must have gone through, the violence that had been done to her psyche and the way this had affected her whole sad life.

The most important event of my early life was the suicide of my brother when I had just turned 21; he was 19. It was mainly because of this event that I left England as soon as I went down from Cambridge – I just couldn't bear to be there. And leaving at that age meant that a life out of England seemed to become more or less inevitable for me. I feel a stranger when I go there now. As I do in the US too of course. I'm English, wholly so I think, but my England is the England of my adolescence, so not I'm not English as England now is.

***What attracted you to Iran and Persian culture? Did the national past time of poetry have anything to do with it? What makes Persian culture different from that of other nations?***

I went to Iran serendipitously. I had a friend who was working there on an archaeological dig, and he absolutely loved it. He suggested I come out for a year and that we share an apartment and both teach English somewhere; it was fairly easy to get a job doing that then. So I found a job at Tehran University, sponsored by the British Council, and went. After the year was up my friend went back to England, but I stayed, mainly because by that time I had met the person who later became my wife.

The importance of poetry in Persian culture was certainly something that I found extremely attractive once I discovered it; it was one of the many things that held me there. As for characterizing Persian culture, this is terribly hard to do in a sentence or two without stereotyping and caricaturing, which of course we emphatically don't want to do. I can perhaps say that I'm constantly struck by the cultural parallels between Italy, where I also lived for a while, and Iran. Both cultures have extremely chaotic pastspolitically, with foreigners periodically marauding over the country and grabbing bits of it; both cultures are the heirs of great empires in antiquity and aren't going to forget that fact; both have the most marvelous artistic heritage of which they are very conscious and very proud; the cities of both cultures have a wonderfully vibrant street life, full of jokes and put downs and spectacle; both cultures have elaborately distinctive cuisines and a love of good food; both cultures have a very powerful religious

establishment that spreads its authority into almost every aspect of life, public or private, but is still shrugged off by large sections of the populace; both cultures place great importance on not losing face, in appearing admirable before others; both cultures have a rather obsessive sense of honor centered on the family; both cultures love conspiracy theories, and so on, and so on. And if anyone feels that there has never been in Italy anything like the early years of the Islamic Republic in Iran, I recommend that he/she read about the (thankfully brief) ascendancy of Savonarola in 15th century Florence, or the activities of the Roman Inquisition from the 16th to the 18th centuries.

***What caused you to take such an interest in the medieval period? Is there something romantic or nostalgic about the pre-industrial age when fealty and chivalry were of paramount importance and mysticism flourished?***

I've always, from early childhood on, been fascinated by the past, in the sense of wondering what people's lives were like "then". How like us were they, and how unlike us? I think a lot of children feel this (Whatever were our parents like before we were here? That kind of thing).

And then the further back the question takes you, the more mysterious, and for that very reason the more fascinating, the lives become. As a child the only language I could read was (of course, in my case) English, and the furthest back you can go reading English is to the medieval period; there isn't English before then. And so the medieval period became quite an obsessive interest early on, and it's just stayed that way for me. Later I learned other languages, or tried to anyway, and read translations, and my horizons widened, but the medieval period has always been where I've felt the strongest tug of intellectual, empathetic, interest (although most medieval societies must have been, for most people, really appalling – "nasty, brutish, and short" as Hobbes says - to live in, by our standards and expectations), and all this comes from my childhood I think. My favorite poet in English, for example, by a long way, is Chaucer. And as I grew up this interest in medieval England morphed, as it seemed naturally, into an interest in non-English medieval societies and literatures.

***How is it that you did not take an interest in translating contemporary Persian poets like Forough Farrokhzad or Akhavan-Sales?***

I mentioned my love of the past, and especially the medieval past. Coupled with this, I fell in love with poetry very early on, and because so much of my mental life as a child was taken up with pre-modern things it was pre-modern poetry I mainly read and learned by heart and, when I started to write verse myself, imitated. Of course as an adolescent I learned that free verse existed, and I duly read a lot of it – the canonic authors as it were (I was a total nerd as a young person, I was always, always, always reading) and even tried to write a bit of free verse when I was about 17 or 18, but I quickly realized, "This is not for me". It seemed so thin and meager, and also so narcissistic, compared with the richness of the poetry of the past. The urge to be like one's peers, and unlike one's predecessors, is one I've never really shared in any deep way, although like all young people I flirted with it for a while. The notion that you can't write in a particular way because it is unfashionable / old-fashioned, or that you must write in a particular way because it's fashionable / avant-garde, has always seemed silly to me. Equally silly to me has always been the notion that poetry is most interesting when it breaks pre-existing rules. It's the easiest thing in the world to break a rule; it's far harder to keep to one and still do something that seems real / true to you, and which is, perhaps, authentically "you". "The fascination of what's difficult", as Yeats says. You write, and translate, the kind of thing you want to read, and free verse wasn't what I was interested in reading. Most contemporary Persian poetry, like that by the two poets you mention, is in free verse, so it doesn't really attract me. I'm less doctrinaire about this than I used to be, and there is some (not a lot, but some) free verse that I can now read with pleasure, but it's not at all where my heart is.

***Did you feel that the world was largely ignorant of classic Persian literature and poetry and were/are you on a mission to educate the world in that regard?***

Well, if by "the world" we mean the

Western world, or even just the English-speaking world, it's obviously the case that it's, as you put it, "largely ignorant of classic Persian literature and poetry". In a way, that's ok, because there are an awful lot of cultures in the world and one can only take on board so much – given how long we tend to be here, there just isn't time to read all the major works by all the major authors of every culture. But if you become interested in a culture's literature, and its great works seem to you to be really marvelous, easily equal to anything in your own culture's literature, naturally you want to proselytize for them a bit. When I was young I devoured Arthur Waley's translations from Chinese and Japanese; I thought they were wonderful, and they opened up a whole new, enchanting (and largely medieval...) world for me. They are much criticized now, but his achievement in drawing attention to literatures that were hardly known in any depth in the English-speaking world is unassailable. He made available to us an astonishing and very beautiful world we'd barely heard of, and later scholars may quibble and nuance what he did, but his achievement was a great one. When I started my PhD in medieval Persian my advisor asked me why I wanted to do this, and I answered, "I want to be the Arthur Waley of Persian literature". I'm not of course, or anything like it, but his achievement has remained a kind of beacon for me, an unattainable model.

***You are one of a handful of British Persophiles starting with Edward G. Brown an amazing individual. Do you have any thoughts or insights about him? What about Richard Burton? About the Shirley brothers....***

Every English speaker who is seriously interested in Persian literature is profoundly indebted to Brown, who really established Persian literature as an academic subject in the English-speaking world. Given the excessively jingoistic period in which he lived, his sympathy for non-European cultures, and for Persian culture in particular, is a truly extraordinary act of sustained, life-long intellectual and emotional empathy. And his multi-volume History of Persian Literature is the bedrock text on the subject, at least in English, even though much of its scholarship has been revised by subsequent

scholars, and some of its judgments can seem a bit eccentric (bravely eccentric, like his dislike of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, but still eccentric). But, as the adage has it, "if we see better it's because we stand on his shoulders." He was at Pembroke College, Cambridge, and I'm lucky enough to have been shown round his rooms there; I was delighted to learn that his rooms had previously been the Cambridge home of the poet-scholar Thomas Gray (the Elegy in A Country Churchyard Gray), who was equally averse to jingoism and sympathetic to non-English cultures and literatures; a nice coincidence of minds across the centuries in that cozy little wood-paneled space.

There were people before Brown of course, though none, with perhaps one exception, as distinguished as him. For example, there was quite a lot of translation done from Persian into English throughout the 19th century, mostly by people with connections to the British Raj in India. The exams for the Raj included papers in Persian, and so anyone who wanted to do well in that world had to learn at least a modicum of the language, which meant that you get lots of bored army officers and Indian civil servants translating the odd Persian text in their spare time, of which some of them seemed to have an inordinate amount. And then there's Edward FitzGerald, someone for whom I have enormous affection, in so far as one can have affection for someone dead long before one was born, who put Persian poetry on the map in England, popularly at least, with his 1859 publication of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*.

You mention Richard Burton; it's a moot point whether he knew any Persian at all, and probably he didn't. The one translation from Persian published under his name, a version of Sa'di's *Golestan*, was in reality done by another scholar, Edward Rehatsek. It was probably published under Burton's name to boost sales, as Burton's works were known to include lots of titillating sexual details about the cultures he was concerned with, often in his footnotes. Rehatsek didn't do this, so there were probably some very disappointed buyers of "Burton's" *Golestan*.

The one scholar before Brown, whom we can perhaps put on a par with him, is the 18th century linguist Sir William Jones – the first man to postulate the existence of an Indo-European family of languages – who published the first Persian grammar in English (following the

precedent of such works in Persian, all the grammatical examples he gives are taken from medieval / classical poetry, which makes it a very charming read). One of my most treasured possessions is a first edition of Jones's *Persian Grammar*. The Shirley brothers are, I agree, absolutely fascinating – and Bravo! that you got to act one of them in a movie! One of the longest of my own poems is a monologue by Teresia Shirley, who was more or less a present given by Shah Abbas to Sir Robert Shirley, to be his wife. As you know, she was an extraordinary woman, and against all odds, as we might think, the marriage was apparently a very happy one; after Sir Robert's death she became a Catholic nun, and died in Rome. An incredible life! It's true there haven't been that many rabid Persophiles from England, but in general they're an interesting bunch, who've led interesting lives.

***Which of the medieval poets or authors is your favorite and why? Which is your favorite work?***

This is a very hard, perhaps impossible, question to answer. The works I know best are naturally enough the ones I've translated (there's nothing like translating a work to ensure that you know it very thoroughly indeed, or at least you should if you do your job properly) and to choose between those would be like asking a parent to choose between his children. It's

especially hard because I only translate works I really love (I don't see any point in translating things I feel half-hearted about, especially when there's so much I feel whole-hearted about). But if I absolutely have to choose one, I must say that I have a special affection for Gorgani's *Vis and Ramin*. This is not an especially admired work in Iran itself, but for me it is an absolutely extraordinary poem, unique in its beauty and charm, and one of the truly great love stories of the world. I have never felt so close to an author as when I was translating Gorgani's poem; almost as if he were spookily in the room with me at times, particularly when I was translating in the silence of the night. But then there is marvelous, ungraspable Hafez – a poet who, as a friend has phrased it, "remains always just out of reach". If I had to characterize the difference between my relationship with Gorgani's work and with Hafez's, I feel that Gorgani perhaps welcomes me, and does so with a kind of complicit affection, but that Hafez is a perpetual, very fascinating, tease; indeed part of the great allure of Hafez's poetry is that so much is shown, but that so much is also withheld. He is absolutely not going to be pinned down.

***What are your thoughts on Sufism? Tell us about translating Rumi, Attar, Hafez and El Ghazali and what you think of them....Nizami's Divan.***



Another very difficult question! When I was young, before I ever went to Iran, I was interested in medieval European mysticism, and read a fair number of its most famous texts (The Cloud of Unknowing, Dionysius the Areopagite, that kind of thing ...). When I started to learn Persian it didn't take me long of course to realize that a great deal of Persian poetry has a Sufi / mystical tinge to it, and some of it is all-out Sufi, as it were. My interest in mysticism continued after my wife and I left Iran, at the end of 1978, and I even edited a little volume of the poems of the 17th century mystical poet Thomas Traherne, whose work I really admired very much (and still do). My wife Afkham and I decided to translate Attar's *Manteqal Tayr* mainly because we thought it was a text that could appeal to people from very different backgrounds, but also to some extent because we found its Sufi content very attractive.

Over time I became rather weary of mysticism, both in its Christian and Sufi forms, and I now think of myself more or less as an atheist. When I read mystical verse now it is really the poetry that I am interested in, rather than the Sufism. Still, a kind of respect for the spiritual seriousness of someone like Attar (or Traherne) has remained with me, and in fact has begun to increase again over the years I think. That seriousness is just so humanly moving, and even an avowed atheist cannot wholly discount, I feel, the wisdom gained by living a life with that kind of focus and intensity. So I'm very drawn to, and really respect, what I take to be authentic (a very loaded word, but it will have to do) spiritual exploration / commitment, but I remain outside it; it's not the world in which I live, or in which I think I could live.

Of the other writers you mention the one of whom I have read the most, apart from Hafez, is Rumi. I have problems with Rumi. Both Attar and Hafez are poets who admit ignorance, who say constantly (especially Hafez) "I don't know, we can't know", and this is one of the things that makes me trust them, and makes them sympathetic to me (because I don't know either, and like Hafez I really doubt anyone can truly claim to "know" about spiritual matters, though some might be further along, as it were, than others). Now Rumi is very sure he knows, and by God he's going to tell you and you'd better listen and take his word for it. He hectors his audience; I really don't like to be hectored.

He's more than a bit of a bully, in spiritual terms, and this can occasionally leave me cold or irritated. Also his reputation in the West as a kind of catch-all-welcomer of travelers on all spiritual paths really ignores important aspects of his writings (I think he himself would be appalled by it, could he know how he is seen nowadays by most of his western readers).

His major work, the *Masnavi*, has a number of passages condemning other religions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism (which, like most medieval Persian poets, he confuses with Hinduism) and their adherents. Now you might say that this is just par for the course for his time, what do you expect? But Attar doesn't say such things (Attar is explicitly sympathetic to other religions, and in the Valley of Insight section of the *Manteqal Tayr* he says that each person reaches truth following his own path, and this is fine, – "Our insight comes to us by different signs / One prays in mosques and one in idols' shrines ..." etc). Neither does Hafez condemn other religions; he too explicitly says that, if the heart is "true", there is an equivalence between faiths. I think this is partly to do with the personal backgrounds of the poets, and partly to do with poetic genres. Rumi was trained as a theologian and, despite everything that is said to have happened with Shams-e Tabrizi, he has retained that sense of the importance of dogma in his writings; neither Hafez nor Attar were people whose profession was the religious life, and dogma means much less to them.

The genre question is interesting; a lot of lyric poems in Persian celebrate a kind of come-one come-all mystical religiosity, and Rumi has a number of such poems (and his popular Western reputation largely rests on moments in poems of this nature, and what we might call their new-age extrapolation). But his didactic poem, the *Masnavi*, has far fewer moments like this, and it includes moments when dogma is quite scathingly exclusive of other faiths. In the *Masnavi* ignorance can be forgiven (as in the lovely story of the shepherd who wants to comb God's hair and catch his lice etc., who is reproved for his blasphemy by Moses, and then God reproves Moses for his reproof), but adherence to the "wrong" faiths cannot.

It's partly poetic genre that dictates such a division; Persian lyric poems traditionally were fairly latitudinarian about religion, but long didactic / dogmatic poems, like the *Masnavi*, were not; they

were, precisely, dogmatic. Now, whether Rumi "really" believed in the kind of open come-one come-all sentiments of some of his lyrics, or in the dogmatic exclusiveness of some parts of his *Masnavi*, is hard to say, and perhaps it's an irrelevant question. (We can see a similar kind of genre-driven content in medieval Persian love poetry; narrative love poems are about heterosexual pairs of lovers, lyric love poems are taken to be about exclusively male couples (unless there is internal evidence to the contrary, which is very rare); some poets write both kinds of poem, and what their own sexual preferences were seems largely irrelevant, the gender of the lovers is decided by the genre in which the poet happens to be writing at a given time). Given this it's very hard to say whether Rumi "really" believed in the latitudinarian mysticism of his lyrics or in the much more dogmatic, Islam-centered, mysticism of his *Masnavi*, but my own feeling is that if he had to decide he would probably come down on the side of dogma (he's much more specific when he talks about dogma, as if the details of belief matter to him). For someone who doesn't share the dogma this is a barrier, one that isn't there in the work of either Attar or Hafez. Don't get me wrong, Rumi is obviously the most marvelous poet, a truly great poet; but he's less sympathetic as a poet for me than either Hafez or Attar – I can find both his tone in many passages, and his didacticism, antipathetic (as one might acknowledge that Tolstoy is the most marvelous novelist, though still frequently finding both his tone and his preachiness very off-putting).

I've hardly read Al-Ghazali, and the bits I have read don't do a lot for me. He's an argumentative so-and-so, and I don't read literature to be argued with. He's not really writing literature, he's writing theology and philosophy, sometimes thinly disguised as a sort of quasi-literature. I admire Nezami, but he takes an awfully long time to say anything, because his poetry is so extraordinarily self-consciously decorative (he's quite like the British Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser in this way); his poetry is very charming, but it's very much, for me, an incidental often rather glittery charm (one is more impressed by an image's brilliance than by what is actually being said). I may well be wrong of course. I have a feeling I should give Nezami more time, as so many people whose judgments I trust think so highly of him.

*to be continued*