

# Identifying with the Orient: Exoticism and Similarity in Jean Lahor's *Quatrains d'Al-Ghazali*

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*Abstract.* This article looks at a rare example of a nineteenth-century author who sought to present the Orient in terms of its similarity rather than its difference: the minor Parnassian poet Jean Lahor (pen name of Henri Cazalis). Lahor's collection of poems, *Les Quatrains d'Al-Ghazali* (first published in 1896 and then expanded for a second edition in 1907) presents the Islamic theologian Al-Ghazali as its author's alter-ego. The article analyses the language of similarity used in the collection's prefatory material and compares Lahor's poems to their alleged sources, which are Al-Ghazali's *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* and the *Robāyyat* of Omar Khayyam. It is shown that, ultimately, Lahor seeks to familiarize Al-Ghazali and remove their cultural differences in order to better exoticize himself. Lahor's seemingly contradictory pursuit of similarity and exoticism is further explained in light of Edward Said's and Tzvetan Todorov's analyses of French writing on cultural difference.

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## Introduction

We are all familiar with the status of the Orient in nineteenth-century French literature as Europe's cultural opposite, a screen on to which authors could project their fantasies of the exotic and their fears of difference, as was seminally described by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978). What has garnered far less critical attention are the efforts in the period to present the Orient in terms of its similarity.<sup>1</sup> The present article focuses on one such case: the collection of poems *Les Quatrains d'Al-Ghazali* by the minor Parnassian poet Jean Lahor (pen name of Henri Cazalis). In this collection, first published in 1896 and then expanded in 1907 for a second edition, Lahor ventriloquizes the eleventh-century Islamic theologian Al-Ghazali, imagining that he wrote poems in the form of the Persian quatrain (*robā'e*), to which Lahor had been

<sup>1</sup> Although it should be noted that Said acknowledges the role played by familiarization in the 'othering' of the Orient, as per the representation of the prophet Mohammad as an 'impostor', similar to Christ but irreducibly different. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 72.

introduced by European translations of Omar Khayyām's *Robāyyiat*.<sup>2</sup> In the preface to the second edition, Lahor justifies his choice to write in the voice of Al-Ghazali by claiming that there exist strong similarities between the life and thoughts of Al-Ghazali and his own. Did this focus on similarity allow Lahor to challenge the period's predominantly exoticizing perspective on the Orient? In order to answer this question, I shall be analyzing Lahor's treatment of his Islamic sources in the collection's prefatory material and poems.

### Lahor's Prefaces

The preface to the first edition of *Les Quatrains d'Al-Ghazali* reads as follows:

Abou-Hamid-Mohammed-Ibn-Ahmed Al-Ghazali naquit à Thous, dans le Khorasân, l'an 1058 de l'ère chrétienne, et y mourut en 1111, en l'an 503 de l'hégire, à l'âge de cinquante-trois ans.

D'âme aimante et d'esprit inquiet, il erra toute sa vie à la recherche de la vérité, de pays en pays, d'un système à l'autre, mais s'arrêta surtout aux enivrantes rêveries du panthéisme musulman. Il fut longtemps soufi, c'est-à-dire panthéiste comme le fut Kheyam, le délicieux poète persan, qui mourut vers 1124, et ainsi fut son contemporain.

N'ayant trouvé nulle part, pas même en cette doctrine, la satisfaction ni le calme, excepté, comme il l'avoue lui-même, 'à de rares heures isolées', il revint vers la fin de sa vie à des études pratiques, surtout de morale, et 'se réjouit des progrès utiles et bienfaisants de la science humaine\*.

Al-Ghazali a écrit des traités religieux, philosophiques et moraux; il n'a jamais écrit ou n'a pas laissé de vers. Au cas où il s'y fut essayé, peut-être eût-il pris la forme du quatrain, immortalisée par Kheyam, qui vécut près de lui, dans le Khorasân. J'ignore s'ils se sont connus.

— PAUL RAVASSE, *Grande Encyclopédie*.<sup>3</sup>

Lahor informs his readers from the outset that Al-Ghazali did not write quatrains. The poems in the collection are thus neither a translation nor an adaptation, but a fiction taking its content from Al-Ghazali's biography and

<sup>2</sup> Lahor had read the 1859 English verse rendition by Edward Fitzgerald and the 1867 French prose translation by Jean-Baptiste Nicolas. Edward Fitzgerald, *Rubāiyāt of Omar Khayyām, the Astronomer-Poet of Persia, Translated into English Verse* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1859). Jean-Baptiste Nicolas, *Les Quatrains de Khéyam, traduits du persan par J. B. Nicolas* (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1867).

<sup>3</sup> Jean Lahor, *Les Quatrains d'Al-Ghazali* (Paris: Lemerre, 1896), p. i. 'Al-Ghazali was born in Tus, in Khorasan, in 1058 AD and died in 1111, the year 503 of hegira, at the age of fifty-three. His soul was loving and his mind restless, he wandered his entire life searching for truth, from country to country, from one system to another, but he mainly dwelled on the intoxicating reveries of Muslim pantheism. He was for a long time a Sufi, that is to say a Pantheist like Khayyām, the sweet Persian poet, who died in 1124 and was thus his contemporary. Having found nowhere, not even in this doctrine, peace nor satisfaction, except, as he admits himself, "in some rare and isolated hours", he returned towards the end of his life to practical studies, especially ethics, and "rejoiced in the useful and beneficiary effects of human science". Al-Ghazali wrote religious, philosophical and moral treatises; he never wrote or at least has not left us any verse. Had he tried his hand at them, he may have used the form of the quatrain, made immortal by Khayyām, who lived near him, in Khorasan. I do not know whether they knew each other'. All translations are my own.

its form from Khayyam. Lahor justifies this choice of form by positing a relationship between Al-Ghazali and Khayyam, who we are told shared the same religion and lived at the same time. All of the information provided on Al-Ghazali is taken from the entry on Al-Ghazali in the *Grande Encyclopédie*.<sup>4</sup> The one moment in which Lahor expresses a subjective impression is the phrase ‘d’âme aimante et d’esprit inquiet’, which foreshadows the manner in which he will characterize Al-Ghazali in the quatrains. This preface therefore has two functions: it justifies the choice of the quatrain as a form and it provides the reader with some authoritative background; by citing Ravaisse’s entry, Lahor is establishing that these poems are based on a real person. What the preface does not do, however, is tell us why a minor Parnassian poet until then known for his interest in Buddhism and Hinduism would want to write in the voice of one of Islam’s greatest authorities. For this we need to turn to the second preface, which comes from a defensive position and as a result has a lot more to say about the choice of Al-Ghazali.

Lahor introduces his second edition, which was published in a volume entitled *En Orient*, as follows:

Quelques-uns ont aimé ce livre, trouvant en certains de ces quatrains comme un ‘triple extrait’ de la poésie orientale, et en d’autres la vibration, l’émotion sincère d’une âme moderne. Beaucoup l’ont peu lu, ou, l’ayant lu, peu compris; la forme d’abord leur en a paru monotone. [...] ces parfums d’orient, il est mieux peut-être de ne les respirer que par gouttes.

Quelques-uns ont donc blâmé cette forme des quatrains, mais, faisant parler en vers le philosophe persan Al-Ghazali, qui vécut à l’époque de Kheyam, l’auteur de quatrains adorables, j’avais le droit de lui faire adopter cette forme poétique, très goûtée de son temps.<sup>5</sup>

Lahor uses a strategic false dichotomy: the opposition between those who appreciated his poetry and those who did not understand it. Focusing on the latter, he defends the choice of the quatrain as a form, on the basis that it belongs to Al-Ghazali’s cultural context. This is the same argument that was made in the first preface, but there has been a shift in vocabulary: while the first preface had said that one *could imagine* that Al-Ghazali, *had he* written poetry, *would* have chosen the quatrain, the second preface tells us: ‘j’avais le droit de lui faire adopter cette forme poétique’. The focus is no longer on Al-Ghazali’s biography, but on Lahor’s instrumentalization of Al-Ghazali, his agency made explicit by

<sup>4</sup> Paul Ravaisse, ‘Gazzali’, in *La grande encyclopédie: inventaire raisonné des sciences, des lettres et des arts*, vol. 18, (Paris: Lamirault [puis] Société anonyme de ‘La Grande encyclopédie’, 1885–1902), pp. 899–900.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Lahor, *En Orient* (Paris: Lemerre, 1907), pp. 5–6. ‘Some have appreciated this book, finding in some of these quatrains a kind of “triple extract” of Oriental poetry, and in others the vibration, the sincere emotion of a modern soul. Many read it little, or, having read it, understood little; the form seemed monotonous to them. [...] it is perhaps better to only inhale these Oriental perfumes in small doses. Some have thus blamed the choice of the quatrain, but, putting into verse the Persian philosopher Al-Ghazali, who lived at the time of Khayyam, the author of adorable quatrains, I had the right to make him adopt this poetic form, which was very popular in his lifetime’.

the term 'faire' (to make), which has coercive connotations. In contrast with the first preface, which had only used the first person once and in a detached manner ('J'ignore s'ils se sont connus'), the second preface has a personal tone. The first person is used a dozen times and always in relation to Lahor's creative process, vindicating his right to poetic license. But Lahor is also vindicating something else: his closeness to Al-Ghazali, which is the ultimate justification for the collection. The second preface continues as follows:

Ces quatrains d'Al-Ghazali, qui n'écrivit jamais en vers [...] sont [...] fort imprégnés par endroits de la pensée moderne [...], ce qui est peut-être un de leurs défauts. Mais je crois volontiers que *le philosophe Al-Ghazali ressemblait à certains d'entre nous*. Du moins c'est l'opinion que j'ai retirée du peu que j'ai lu de lui. [...]

Il a eu, *lui aussi*, la passion de la vérité; *lui aussi* à travers le monde, à travers toutes les écoles philosophiques, s'est mis à sa poursuite et ne l'a pas trouvée; *lui aussi* au sortir des religions, comme de ces écoles où il avait donc si longtemps et si vainement erré, il s'est contenté [...] de quelques lueurs çà et là entrevues [...]. Et alors, revenu de ses grandes ivresses, de ses infinis espoirs, de [...] l'amour mystique, il n'a plus vu et affirmé que deux choses, le peu qu'est l'homme dans les gouffres du temps et de l'espace, et devant l'incertitude de *notre sort*, [...] la nécessité de la pitié qui peut alléger ses souffrances [...]. Une phrase [...] du philosophe Al-Ghazali m'étonna: *j'y retrouvais une partie de ma pensée; sa vie, quand je vins à la connaître, ressemblait à la mienne*. C'est ainsi que j'eus l'idée d'écrire ces quatrains sous son nom, *comme si j'étais un peu lui, ou qu'il eût été un peu moi*. (My emphasis)<sup>6</sup>

Similarity and equivalence are present not only through the use of verbs such as 'ressembler' and 'retrouver', but also through the anaphoric repetition of 'lui aussi' and the powerful mirroring effect of the final clause: Lahor cannot decide whether it is he who is like Al-Ghazali or Al-Ghazali who was like him.

What is striking about this preface is that it functions outside of the paradigm of Orientalism identified by Edward Said, in which the Orient is defined in diametric opposition to the Occident. Al-Ghazali is not defined by his otherness, but by his similarity to Lahor and modern French readers. Lahor suggests this by describing the parallels between his own search for truth and that of Al-Ghazali, and also by emphasizing the universality of the

<sup>6</sup> Lahor, *En Orient*, pp. 6–7. 'These quatrains by Al-Ghazali, who never wrote verse, [...] are at times strongly imbued with modern thought, [...] which is perhaps one of their flaws. But I am willing to believe that the philosopher Al-Ghazali *resembled some of us*. That is at least the opinion that I have formed from the little that I have read of him. [...] *He too* had a passion for truth; *he too* pursued it, across the world, across all philosophical schools; *he too* leaving religions, like those schools in which he had erred in vain for such a long time, contented himself [...] with a few glimmers glimpsed here and there. [...] And then, returning from his great intoxications, his infinite hopes, [...] from mystical love, he only saw and affirmed two things, the insignificance of man before the abyss of time and space, before the uncertainty of *our fate*, [...] the necessity of compassion in order to alleviate [...] suffering. A sentence [...] by the philosopher Al-Ghazali surprised me: *I recognized in it a part of my thought; his life, once I came to know it, resembled mine*. That is how I had the idea of writing these quatrains under his name, *as if I were a little him, or he were a little me*'.

human condition, in particular through the use of the first person plural: 'l'incertitude de notre sort'. Lahor thus suggests that existential angst and the search for meaning exist beyond historical, geographic or religious boundaries: the sensitivity and preoccupations that he shares with Al-Ghazali are powerful enough to create a feeling of intimacy, in spite of the distance between them. The question is: on what basis and with what aim did Lahor make this universalist claim?

### Lahor's *Quatrains* and Al-Ghazali's *Munqidh*

In the first preface Lahor states that Al-Ghazali was 'soufi, c'est-à-dire panthéiste comme le fut Kheyam'. But although they were both eleventh-century men from Khorasan, Al-Ghazali and Khayyam's outlooks differed widely. Al-Ghazali was a devout Muslim, as one would expect from Islam's most influential theologian. Khayyam's religious beliefs in contrast will always be open to debate, some seeing him as a mystic and others as a heretic. This is unsurprising, since medieval Persian poetry is characterized by its ambiguity and openness to interpretation. While we can speculate as to whether Khayyam was a pantheist, that is someone believing that God is present in all of creation, calling Al-Ghazali a pantheist is wildly inaccurate. Pantheism, which was identified with certain Sufi groups — and we should note that pantheism is not a synonym for Sufism — was strongly condemned by orthodox Muslims, and the one text by Al-Ghazali that we know Lahor had read includes one such condemnation.

Lahor's source for the *Quatrains* was Al-Ghazali's intellectual and spiritual autobiography, *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* (*Munqidh* for short). This first-person Arabic treatise was translated into French in 1842 by the German Orientalist Augustus Schmölders, under the title *Ce qui sauve des égarements et ce qui éclaire les ravissements*, and later retranslated by Barbier de Meynard with the more unfortunate title *Le Préservatif de l'Erreur* (1877). In the *Munqidh* Al-Ghazali explains that he was born with a God-given thirst for knowledge and therefore devoted his adult life to the pursuit of truth. This leads him to study, to quote Schmölders's translation, 'les diverses classes d'hommes qui, selon mon avis, cherchaient la vérité'.<sup>7</sup> These are the various religious sects and philosophical schools that existed when Al-Ghazali was writing, and which he classifies and reviews in turn, ending with Sufism. Al-Ghazali writes that of all sects, the Sufis are the closest to God, with the exception of those Sufis who believe in pantheism, since that is a sin.<sup>8</sup>

In the opening of the *Munqidh*, Al-Ghazali states that in order to find the truth, he had to forget established authorities and proceed to his own

<sup>7</sup> Auguste Schmölders, *Essai sur les écoles philosophiques chez les Arabes et notamment sur la doctrine d'Alghazzali* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1842), p. 24. 'The different classes of men searching for truth'.

<sup>8</sup> Schmölders, *Essai*, pp. 60–61.

conclusions. This passage appeals to modern secular sensibilities, since it posits the individual's independence from received knowledge. It is in this very passage that Lahor encountered the mysterious 'phrase' which he tells his readers led him to identify with Al-Ghazali. An earlier draft, rather than exciting curiosity by leaving the actual sentence unrevealed, paraphrased the following paragraph from Schmölders's translation of the *Munqidh*:

Qui t'assure donc que tout ce que tu reconnais dans l'état de veille, grâce à la sensation ou à l'entendement, existe effectivement? Tout cela est assurément vrai en égard à ton état actuel; mais il est pourtant possible qu'un autre état s'offre à toi, lequel soit à ton état de veille ce que celui-ci est maintenant à ton sommeil, de sorte que, par rapport à cet état, ton état de veille ne soit qu'un sommeil. Quand tu auras atteint cet état, tu reconnaîtras que toutes les choses perçues par ta raison sont des imaginations sans réalité.<sup>9</sup>

But what is even more telling, is what Lahor chooses to omit. In the *Munqidh*, the doubts described by Al-Ghazali are not an end point, but a starting point: a straw man that is countered by his faith in God.

Le malaise que je ressentais était bien grave et dura environ deux mois [...] jusqu'à ce que Dieu me guérit de cette indisposition [...], et que mon âme recouvra la paix et la santé. [...] Quiconque s'imagine qu'une vérité ne peut être rendue évidente que par des preuves, met des bornes bien étroites à la large miséricorde de Dieu.<sup>10</sup>

Lahor's use of the passage from the *Munqidh* in this draft is selective to the point of distortion, turning a tribute to God's 'miséricorde' into a declaration of scepticism. This misrepresentation continues in the final version of the preface, which states that Al-Ghazali searched for truth without ever finding it.

Lahor's erasure of Al-Ghazali's religious faith is obvious both in his selective quotation in the draft preface and in the quatrains themselves, which are organized into three parts: 'L'Amour', 'Le Doute', and 'La Pitié du Renoncement'. The poems in the second section describe a loss of faith and those in the third section merge together elements from Sufi poetry, Buddhist thought, and Hindu liturgy. This sequencing creates a narrative according to which Al-Ghazali abandons Islam in favour of syncretism, two developments that do not appear in the *Munqidh*, in which Al-Ghazali states that he is assisted by God in his search for truth. In a subtler manner, Lahor's references

<sup>9</sup> Schmölders, *Essai*, p. 20. 'Who can guarantee that all that you recognize while awake, through your senses and understanding, truly exists? This may well be true with regards to your current condition; yet it remains possible that another state might offer itself to you, whose relationship to your condition while awake is comparable to your current relationship with your condition while asleep. When you will have reached such a state, you will recognize that all the things perceived by your reason are nothing more than unfounded fantasies'. Lahor's draft is quoted in René Petitbon, *Les Sources orientales de Jean Lahor* (Paris: Nizet, 1962), p. 213.

<sup>10</sup> Schmölders, *Essai*, p. 23. 'The malaise that I was feeling was a grave one and it lasted about two months [...] until God cured me from this indisposition [...], and my soul regained peace and health. [...] Whomever imagines that a truth can only be revealed by bringing forth evidence is placing very narrow limits on God's vast mercy'.

to Al-Ghazali as a 'Persian philosopher' (as opposed to 'Islamic theologian') also contribute to this process. The term is technically correct, but it draws attention away from Al-Ghazali's religion: one can be Persian and one can be a philosopher without being Muslim.<sup>11</sup> We find ourselves wondering: how could Lahor write an Al-Ghazali that was so far removed from what his sources indicated? There are two explanations: either Lahor did not read beyond page 20 of Schmölders's translation or he knew that he would not be able to claim a resemblance between himself and Al-Ghazali if he provided an accurate summary of the *Munqidh*, a work written in order to defend Islam against other religions and philosophies.<sup>12</sup>

Another element of cultural difference that is erased by Lahor is that of poetic form. The collection's most original feature is its (claimed) imitation of the Persian quatrain or *robā'e*. But whereas the *robā'e* has a fixed rhyme structure of *aaba*, Lahor uses couplets, *rimes embrassées* and *rimes croisées*, that is to say, the rhyme structures of French versification. The most important difference between the French quatrain and the *robā'e* is that whereas the former is always used as a stanza, the latter can be used as a stand-alone poem. This brevity gives the *robā'e* an axiomatic quality, which showcases the poet's powers of synthesis: the reason behind Khayyam's popularity is his ability to pose existential questions within the space of only four lines. Lahor does not attempt to recreate this defining feature of the Persian quatrain. Instead, he arranges his quatrains into thematic sequences, connecting them through strategies such as the use of refrains or a unifying title.<sup>13</sup>

### Conclusion

The question this article set out to answer was whether Lahor's choice to focus on similarity rather than difference challenged the period's dominant understanding of the Orient as Europe's diametric opposite, i.e. what Edward Said calls 'Orientalism'. In order to answer this question, I will draw on another important analysis of European writing on cultural difference: Tzvetan Todorov's *Nous et les autres* (1989). Todorov argues that French thinkers from the Enlightenment to the twentieth century viewed cultural difference either through the prism of universalism (which, in its negative form, becomes ethnocentrism) or relativism (which, in its negative form, does not view all

<sup>11</sup> Lahor, *En Orient*, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Another possible explanation is that the scholarship of the time regarded Asian religions as interconnected: Sufism in particular was viewed as merging Islam with Hinduism (see René Petitbon, *Sources orientales*, p. 97 and p. 108). But the leap from the *Munqidh*'s defence of Islam to the *Quatrains*'s rejection of Islam in favour of syncretism is so great that one must admit that, even if Lahor was basing himself on academic authorities, he nonetheless chose to ignore the explicit message of the single work by Al-Ghazali that he claimed to have read.

<sup>13</sup> See for example the use of the refrain 'Oh! qu'il est doux, près de l'aimée' in the first and fourth quatrain pp. 26–27 or the section entitled 'Le dialogue d'Allah et du poète' pp. 67–83 of Lahor, *En Orient*.

human beings as equal). The ‘Orientalists’ described by Said would fall into the former category, since they considered the ways in which the Orient differed from Europe as grounds to determine its inferiority. Indeed, the colonial *mission civilisatrice* was based on the premise that it would be preferable for France’s others to be more similar to France. Although universalism and relativism are two opposite views, they can masquerade as one another. Todorov gives as an example of this the cultural relativism of Montaigne’s essay *Des Cannibales*, which praises the ‘cannibals’ by comparing them to the ancient Greeks. Montaigne’s aim in praising a different society is to show cultural relativism, but he is ultimately speaking from an ethnocentric perspective, since the otherness of the ‘cannibals’ is only judged positively because of its perceived similarities with the European classical heritage. The same can be said of Lahor’s *Quatrains*: Al-Ghazali is only praised in terms of his similarities, an ethnocentric approach which relies on the erasure of differences — most notably, Al-Ghazali’s unwavering faith in Islam.

Todorov suggests that the universalist who claims to be a relativist is unimpeachable because ‘il ne s’est pas aperçu de la différence des autres’.<sup>14</sup> This can certainly be said of Lahor’s use of form, which shows no awareness of the differences between French and Persian versification. Lahor’s erasure of Islamic faith from Al-Ghazali’s search for truth, however, seems too deliberate to be caused by mere ignorance. Lahor’s overt aim was to familiarize Al-Ghazali, but this was in reality a means to an end: that of exoticizing himself. Indeed, although Lahor rewrote Al-Ghazali’s religious identity, he nonetheless wanted the *Quatrains* to maintain an exotic quality. This exoticism is present in the first preface, which emphasizes Al-Ghazali’s cultural belonging to medieval Iran; the second preface, which refers to the quatrains as ‘parfums d’Orient’; and the second edition’s placement of the *Quatrains* alongside translations from Khayyam’s *Robāyyiat* and the *Song of Songs* in a volume entitled *En Orient*. These editorial choices give the volume the appearance of an anthology of Oriental literature, of which — it is implied — Omar Khayyam, the anonymous authors of the Hebrew Bible, and Jean Lahor are all equally representative.

One question remains: why did Jean Lahor choose to write in the voice of Al-Ghazali, a devout Muslim, when he was in fact interested in a form of syncretism derived from Hinduism and Buddhism? I would suggest that Lahor’s main reason for choosing Al-Ghazali was the theologian’s name. The equivalence between Lahor’s thought and the Hindu literature from which he drew inspiration had previously been suggested by Mallarmé.<sup>15</sup> What Lahor needed in order to confirm the Oriental character of his poetry was an alter-ego, one so close that it would be impossible to tell them apart. Having previously

<sup>14</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Nous et les autres: La réflexion française sur la diversité humaine* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), p. 71. ‘He has not noticed that others are different’.

<sup>15</sup> ‘[T]on Orient s’exhale tout entier de ton âme, [...] tu n’as fait que juxtaposer un mal exotique à ta pensée, comme une preuve ou une illustration’. 18 June 1888 letter from Mallarmé, quoted in Marcel Schwab, *La Renaissance orientale* (Paris: Payot, 1950), p. 568.

used the pen name Caselli, an Italian surname chosen for its homonymy with his surname (pronounced without sounding the final 's'), he would no doubt have been struck by the phonetic closeness between Cazalis and Ghazali. The title *Les Quatrains d'Al-Ghazali* can therefore be read as a pun on its author's name. If we revisit the second preface from this perspective, it yields a different meaning: the final words 'comme si j'étais un peu lui, ou qu'il eût été un peu moi' no longer seem an expression of intimacy, but rather an unveiling of the game of masks that is being played. You cannot tell who is who, because this Al-Ghazali is none other than Henri Cazalis.

Should we conclude from this that *fin-de-siècle* French poets were ultimately incapable of identifying any real similarities between their concerns and those of medieval Islamic authors? The cases of Marceline Desbordes-Valmore — who redeployed Sa'di's meditations on the pleasures and pitfalls of language in a modern, secular, and feminized context — and Armand Renaud — who in his collection *Les Nuits persanes* (1870) borrowed in equal measure from French and Persian poetic traditions, creating unexpected analogies between the status of poetry in *fin-de-siècle* Paris and fourteenth-century Shiraz — forbid us from making this generalization.<sup>16</sup> What we can say is that Lahor capitalized on the perceived otherness of the Orient: selling his French verses as 'Oriental perfumes' was all it took to convince French readers of their originality.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> On Desbordes-Valmore see my article 'Beyond Orientalism: When Marceline Desbordes-Valmore carried Sa'di's Roses to France', *Iranian Studies* 52.5–6 (2019), 785–808. Armand Renaud's collection is analysed in my current book project on Iran in French literature, which is supported by the Leverhulme Trust.

<sup>17</sup> Admirers included the young Marcel Proust (see Petitbon, *Sources orientales*, p. 271).