



## Music of a Distant Drum: Classical Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew Poems

From Brand: Princeton University Press

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### Music of a Distant Drum: Classical Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew Poems From Brand: Princeton University Press

*Music of a Distant Drum* marks a literary milestone. It collects 129 poems from the four leading literary traditions of the Middle East, all masterfully translated into English by Bernard Lewis, many for the first time. These poems come from diverse languages and traditions--Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew--and span more than a thousand years. Together they provide a fascinating and unusual window into Middle Eastern history. Lewis, one of the world's greatest authorities on the region's culture and history, reveals verses of startling beauty, ranging from panegyric and satire to religious poetry and lyrics about wine, women, and love.

Bernard Lewis, one of the world's greatest authorities on the region's culture and history, offers a work of startling beauty that leaves no doubt as to why such poets were courted by kings in their day. Like those in the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, the poems here--as ensured by Lewis's mastery of all the source languages and his impeccable style and taste--come fully alive in English. They are surprising and sensuous, disarmingly witty and frank. They provide a fascinating and unusual glimpse into Middle Eastern history. Above all, they are a pleasure to read. They range from panegyric and satire to religious poetry and lyrics about wine, women, and love. Lewis begins with an introduction on the place of poets and poetry in Middle Eastern history and concludes with biographical notes on all the poets.

This treasure trove of verse is aptly summed up by a quote from the ninth-century Arab author Ibn Qutayba: "Poetry is the mine of knowledge of the Arabs, the book of their wisdom, the muster roll of their history, the repository of their great days, the rampart protecting their heritage, the trench defending their glories, the truthful witness on the day of dispute, the final proof at the time of argument."

In one hand the Qur'vn, in the other a wineglass,  
Sometimes keeping the rules, sometimes breaking them.  
Here we are in this world, unripe and raw,  
Not outright heathens, not quite Muslims.

--*Mujir* (12th century)

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### Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Edited and translated by Lewis, a well-known scholar of Arabic culture, this collection of 132 "classical" Middle Eastern poems dating from the seventh to the 18th centuries reveals the extensive heritage of Islamic poetry. The poems are divided into Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew "rich and ancient" cultures that "reflect a wide variety of approaches and activities, from the pagan desert to the Muslim city." Showing how Islamic culture from antiquity has been composed of interrelated, "multiracial" groups, Lewis's erudite introduction discusses the emergence of Arabic languages and the status of poets and pays tribute to "the love of poetry and respect for poetry characteristic of Arab culture." Of various ethnicities, 54 predominantly male poets (Omar Khayyam and Rumi are the most familiar) living in diverse countries (e.g., Azerbaijan, Ethiopia, and Spain) express international cultural awareness centuries before the modern era. Sometimes humorous or mystical, the poems focus on family, love, and religion. Including biographies, illustrations, and an appendix of scripts of each source language, this collection is a fine historical document and anthology of eloquent poetry. For all academic and larger public libraries. Frank Allen, Northampton Community Coll., Tannersville, PA

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From [The New Yorker](#)

Lewis, one of the foremost scholars of the Middle East, has devoted much of his career to the history of Islam; this volume collects his translations of poems—nearly all appearing in English for the first time—that span eleven centuries and four major Middle Eastern traditions. Many of the most striking works address, in spare, stirring lines, the twin demands of serving the self and serving God: "Love is a lamp of God, I am its moth; / love is a shackle, my heart its crazy captive." For the Sufi poets in particular, poetry is an occasion for mystical experience, and their work frequently offers a vision of transcendence that is grounded in the senses: "O Sun of Tabriz, I am so tipsy here in this world, / I have no tale to tell but tipsiness and rapture."

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From [Booklist](#)

Lewis, for decades an icon in Middle East studies, isn't as good a translator as he is a scholar, but only he could single-handedly assemble poems from so many languages and cultures into a coherent anthology. Divided into four linguistic sections--Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew--the poems span half the world and a millennium of history. Beginning in the seventh century and reaching to the eighteenth, Lewis selects from all the big names of Middle Eastern classical poetry, from Rumi to Omar Khayyam. The anthology's real strength, though, lies in its inclusion of poets rarely translated, especially Al-Hallaj, whose Arabic Sufi poems announcing the possibility of unity with God led to his assassination. Although translating from four languages, Lewis captures the rhythms and cadences of each admirably. Unfortunately, he furnishes little historical or religious context for the poems, which makes much of the verse obscure for those lacking knowledge of Islamic and Hebraic history. Still, fans of Rumi and other better-known Eastern poets should find several new and intriguing voices here. *John Green*

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