

BEHNAM M. FOMESHI. *The Persian Whitman: Beyond a Literary Reception*. Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2019, 256 pp.

In the long history of world poetry, a few poets—often because they were far ahead of their time—were neglected, ostracized, and even hated during their lifetimes, and the importance of their poetry was only belatedly recognized and appreciated. Walt Whitman is a notable case in point. While not properly appreciated in his lifetime, his poetry was received warmly in the twentieth century not only in the U.S. but also around the world, and his absorption into other languages and cultures—from Germany to Brazil to Italy to China to France and beyond—has been the subject of numerous books and essays over the past twenty-five years. Now we can add Iran to the list.

Siegbert S. Praver, in his *Comparative Literary Studies: An Introduction* (1973), made the point that “[s]tudies of reception, diffusion and literary fortune, form an important part of comparative studies. In the wrong hands they degenerate, all too easily, into mechanical catalogues; ... scholars engaging in this kind of exercise have first to collect and then interpret.” Behnam Fomeshi, a well-versed comparatist, deftly performs these two comparativist acts—collection and interpretation of the translations of the works of a certain author in a certain period—in *The Persian Whitman*. Fomeshi investigates in detail the reception of Whitman’s poetry during almost a century—from 1922 to 2019—in Iran. So, as the subtitle of the book rightly indicates, the study goes “beyond a literary reception” because it also covers the social, political, and ideological background of the Iranian encounter with Whitman. Fomeshi has examined all the book-length and fragmentary Persian translations of Whitman, except for one: Hassan Shahbaz’s translation of four poems published in *A Survey in World Most Famous Books*, volume one (1974). (As Fomeshi shows, all such fragmentary translations contributed, however slightly, to the continuation of the presence of Whitman’s poetry in Iran.)

*The Persian Whitman* is comprised of an introduction, nine chapters, a conclusion, and an appendix—“a chronology of sociopolitical and literary events of modern Iran interspersed with significant dates in Whitman’s reception.” The book is an interdisciplinary study, dealing with comparative literature (reception studies and imagology) and literary criticism (New Historicism), as well as with translation studies (translation and ideology and Genette’s paratextual elements).

The first three chapters focus on Whitman’s turbulent life, his unusual poetic innovations, and his literary, social, and political contexts, including the dominant discourses of nineteenth-century U.S. democracy and nationalism.

Fomeshi aims primarily to connect Whitman's poetic career to his reception in Iran. Although these chapters are informative, they are too long for a study like this one. A potential future edition might condense them into a single chapter.

Reception studies of a writer in another culture focus chiefly on the translation of the author's works into the target language; accordingly, Fomeshi devotes the fourth chapter to an examination of the first Persian translation of Whitman, "The Big City" by Yusef Etesami (1874-1938). This translation is in fact an excerpt from "Song of the Broad-Axe" and consists of the last two lines of the fourth section of the poem together with the subsequent section. Because of religious and political reasons, or perhaps official censorship or self-censorship, the translation provides only a modified version of Whitman's poetry, with some lines left out to correspond with "the country's constitutional movement towards democracy." It is also noteworthy that Etesami's translation was reprinted in a well-known anthology, Hamidi Shirazi's *The Sea of Gem* (1955), which has gone through ten editions and has contributed to Whitman's continuing presence in Iran.

The fifth chapter discusses the relationship between the rise of Persian literary modernism and the emergence of Whitman in Iran. According to Nima Yushij (1897-1960), the father of the New Poetry modernist school, Persian poets turned to some modern European (notably French) poets as well as to Whitman, the first modern American poet, to modernize Persian poetry. Fomeshi focuses on a section from Nima's *The Value of Feelings* to analyze how Nima read Whitman and to elaborate on his poetic innovation and modern poetics, showing how Nima used the "urban" aspect and the loose structure—without meter and rhyme—of Whitman's poetry to break with traditional norms of Persian poetry and to justify his own unorthodox poetic innovations and poetic discourse.

Next, Fomeshi takes up an "unexplored field"—the literary relationship between poet Parvin Etesami (1907-1941) and Whitman. Fomeshi suggests that Whitman's "A Noiseless Patient Spider" was Parvin's source of inspiration in writing the poem "God's Weaver," and argues that Parvin's poem can be regarded as an artistic adaptation, not a superficial copy, written in the form of a debate incorporating elements from mystical Persian poetry, her personal life, and her zeitgeist to appropriate or "naturalize" it. According to Fomeshi, "Parvin might have come across 'A Noiseless Patient Spider' in her student days in the American school for girls in Tehran"—a claim that is not well-documented. It is difficult to find clear answers to the question of direct influence, and the comparatist must refer to the author's autobiography, interviews, diaries, and so on to find a clue. Without evidence, it is an unsupportable assumption.

Rather, it is fair to conclude that the Whitman/Parvin comparison is a study in analogies or parallels rather than direct influence. According to scholar Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, Attar's parable of the spider in *The Conference of the Birds* was another source of inspiration to Parvin: "To me, Parvin has read Attar's parable of the spider and in writing his 'God's Weaver' was under his influence" (*Bud O Nemud Sokhan.Tehran* [2015], 232). Fomeshi, however, does not take Attar's work into consideration.

Chapter 7 focuses on the association between Nima and Whitman that owes much to the literary and political activities of Ehsan Tabari (1917-1989) in the 1940s. Tabari was among the first translators of Whitman for Persian readers and had both familial and literary relations with Nima, all of which "link the two modern poets under the leftist discourse in Persian literary and intellectual circles." Using Genette's paratextual elements (the epitext and the peritext), Fomeshi bridges comparative literature and translation studies to shed more light on Whitman's reception in Iran. Of particular importance is the contribution of *Sukhan*, a leading and widely read journal where Tabari's short introduction on Whitman and two translations by "M. M." appeared. Fomeshi believes that "Nima was so pleased with the introduction that he wrote a letter to Tabari and thanked him for his interpretation of the poem." The documents themselves, however, show the opposite. According to well-known Nima scholar Sirus Tahbaz, "this introduction made Nima very angry, and he wrote a letter back to Tabari" that put an end to his collaboration with the periodical (*Kamandar-I Buzurg-I Kuhsaran* [2008], 723).

Fomeshi's next chapter, a study in imagology, provides an answer to the question "What does the Persian Whitman look like?" By "image" Fomeshi means "both visual representations, such as pictures or photographs, and the mental conceptions held in common by members of a group." This chapter, dealing with translation of the writer's "image" in Iran, is the most creative and innovative part of the book, scrutinizing the front covers of two recent book-length Persian translations of Whitman by Farid Ghadami (2010) and Mohsen Tohidian (2011). According to Fomeshi, the front covers present the American poet as a sage or a mystic, comparable to the image Iranians have of the Persian poets. Fomeshi neglects, however, the front cover of a recent book-length Persian translation of Whitman by Mansoreh Bakvaie (2016), which would further support his ideas. It is also worth mentioning that the front cover of the 2019 edition of Parham's translation of Whitman and the front cover of the Persian translation of the Cambridge Introduction to Whitman (trans. Razieh Sarmadi [2019]), both published after *The Persian Whitman* appeared, also

support Fomeshi's reading of the image of the Persian Whitman. What is more, the front cover of the 2002 edition of Parham's translation of Whitman designed by Farshid Mesghali (1943-) and inspired by a line from "A Song of Joys," while not an image of Whitman, represents a different aspect of Whitman's poetry and character than that which Fomeshi addresses. Interestingly, the front cover of *The Persian Whitman*—a reproduction of a Civil War photograph—displays the prematurely old and wise poet, the exact picture that the Persian reader wants to see. In this picture, Whitman gazes into a distant vista, where perhaps he can dimly make out the ultimate success of American democracy, even while the war rages around him.

The penultimate chapter studies Farid Ghadami's (1985-) 2010 translation of fifteen Whitman poems and delves into the intricate relationship between Persian poetry and Iranian politics, exploring the interactions between the opposing discourses in modern Iran post-2009. From here, Fomeshi concludes the book by examining Whitman's increasing presence in Iranian academia and his growing presence on the Web. There are two minor errors in this final chapter. First, Fomeshi claims that "Sipihri was familiar with Whitman; the many instances of anaphora . . . might have been a single indication of this famil-iarity," but, again, there is no proof for this claim. While anaphora is one of Whitman's favorite literary devices, this does not mean that Sipihri necessarily borrowed it from Whitman, since Sipihri may have known examples of anaphora in Persian literature—as in some poems by Rumi. Second, Fomeshi claims that Tabari "wrote an introduction to Whitman and translated three poems of the American poet." Tabari in fact wrote a one-page introduction on M. M.'s trans-lation of "When I Peruse the Conquer'd Fame" and "As I Lay with My Head in Your Lap Camerado," which were published in *Sukhan*, but he translated only "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," which appeared in *Name Mardum*.

*The Persian Whitman* is a methodologically innovative, original, and well-documented interdisciplinary study. The author's ideas, interpretations, and conclusions are logical and convincing. More importantly, the book is full of innovative readings of both familiar and overlooked materials. Despite a few unnecessary repetitions, *The Persian Whitman* is a well-organized book, enjoyable to read and full of valuable information. It will be useful to those interested in Iranian studies, comparative literature, translation studies, American literature, and Modern Persian Literature.

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