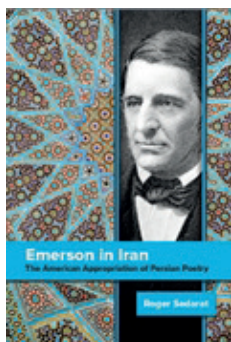




EMERSON IN IRAN: THE AMERICAN APPROPRIATION OF PERSIAN POETRY

by Roger Sedarat
(A Book Review)



In his recent book, *Emerson in Iran: The American Appropriation of Persian Poetry*, Roger Sedarat, professor of English at CUNY's Queens College, has placed Ralph Waldo Emerson's engagement with classical Persian poetry at the center of his study. Emerson found his way to Persian literature in the 1840s and, despite his illiteracy in Persian, translated nearly two thousand lines from Persian poets

via the intermediary German renderings by Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall. Building on and inspired by earlier scholarship, mostly in the form of essays and book chapters, *Emerson in Iran*, as one of the few monographs ever published in the field, sets out to illuminate the influence of Emerson's practice of translation on his original works and, subsequently, American poetry. The book also demonstrates how American literary translation was influenced by Emerson's appropriative renderings and his general attitude to foreign voices.

The book's cover shows a black and white image of Emerson whose contrast with the circular, oriental motifs of the colorful mosaics in the background is emphasized by two brilliant vertical borders. Dedicating the work to his two countries and foregrounding his hybrid identity as a poet-scholar inheritor of both Iranian

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and American poetic traditions, Sedarat anticipates the upcoming main themes and arguments. The book is a history of hybridity and contradictions, an exploration of the paradoxes such as circle and line, self-reliance and imitation, transparency and shadow, expression and abstention, originality and translation, unity and fragmentation, fatalism and free-will, East and West. The writer delineates how these paradoxes distort, transform, and pass through one another—finally forming a new different composition, a sort of interactive coexistence, like Emerson with his typical American face reposing peacefully at the heart of the vibrantly colored tiles of Iranian architecture on the book's cover.

Sedarat, mostly in the first chapter, investigates the philosophical origins of Emerson's transnational approach and his affinity with the Persian mystic poets. He argues that Platonism as the underpinning of Romanticism and Transcendentalism enabled Emerson to ignore the linguistic, temporal, religious, and literary differences; accommodate transnational influences; and direct American poetry toward an atemporal, all-unifying Platonic ideal. Moreover, fundamental correspondences between Sufi mysticism and Neoplatonism resulted in Emerson's and Sufi poets' similar visions. According to Sedarat, the emancipating look manifested in Persian verse, the poetic and philosophic interpretation of religious principles, and the subversion of Islamic strictures and religious fanaticism, all facilitated Emerson's communication with Persian poetry despite the latter being informed by Islamic tradition. Both Platonic recollection and Sufis' memory of the pre-eternal oath or covenant refer to a similar theme that is the return to the origination where all differences are unified. Belief in the common, picturesque or symbolic language of nature, which is the material manifestation of the spiritual according to Emerson and the reflection of the divine countenance according to Sufis, is another characteristic shared by Emerson and Persian poets. The book explicates that the spiritual poetry of Hafez and Sa'di provides a means of release not only from the fatalism of Mohammadism but also the determinism felt by Emerson in the Christian origins of Catholicism. Such poetry interprets the will of God as love, relies on inner wisdom in place of acquired knowledge, and despises *aql* (reason), just as Emerson himself disparaged understanding.

Having elaborated on the philosophical affinity between Emerson and Persian mysticism, the book continues with the meticulous examination of Persian poetry woven invisibly into Emerson's writings. Sedarat focuses on Hafez and Sa'di whose works resonate in Emerson's oeuvre more than those of other Persian poets. The arguments are mostly predicated on Emerson's translations from these two poets, particularly those of Hafez, his comments on them, and the compositions he wrote in imitation of their poetry or inspired by their insights and power of expression. The theoretical framework of the book is based on the theories of Harold Bloom, Homi Bhabha, and Willis Barnstone. Analyzing the close correspondence between Persian poetry and Emerson's vision and rhetoric, Sedarat unveils imitation in the works of a self-reliant author who, with an assimilating power, disavows his dependence on predecessors and pretends not to be suffering from the anxiety of influence. However, by exposing this influence, Sedarat does not negate Emerson's self-reliance but shows the reconciliation of the paradox of originality and imitation in this outsourcing writer. Applying Bhabha's theory of the third space of enunciation, Sedarat argues that Emerson's individuality is developed in a third hybrid space that is the result of the conflation of East and West. This hybrid new self is manifested in Emerson's appropriative translations of Persian verse, his original poems written in imitation of them, and the identities of Persian poets redefined by him in his essays and poems. Emerson puts Sufi poets beside Greco-Roman deities, renders *Saqi* (cup-bearer) as "Bacchus," and a Persian mythological bird as "Phoenix," ignores the Islamic context of the poems, and recreates Sa'di's identity within the American context along with changing his name to "SAID." He then adopts or appropriates this new American-Iranian identity, and this newly discovered—or, better yet, newly created—voice grants him the power of self-expression. Thus, Sedarat shows how the Persian predecessors imitated by Emerson are partly the product of his formative gaze to the Orient. He is imitating foreign fathers, hued by his own domesticating, creative look to them. Making claims on both poetry and identity of Persian poets, Emerson satisfies his desire to see as they do and be as they are. He looks around through the eyes of thousand-eyed Hafez and agonizes over the death of his darling

son through Sa'di's translated elegy. Letting these voices in, along with the penetrating visions they represent, Emerson gets rid of all mean egotism and moves towards the Platonic all-encompassing ideal, the transparent eyeball, which is a state similar to Sufis' *fana* or self-annihilation. Sedarat provides an insightful analysis that connects the American's act of appropriation to his rhetoric. Integrating Hafez's fragmented, allusion-filled lyrics and Sa'di's hybrid prose-poetry form into his aphoristic writings, Emerson diminishes the rhetorical Western ego as well and develops a decentering one fitting to express his fragmented, circular aesthetic.

Emerson in Iran is not only the examination of Emerson's relation to Iran but also an attempt to formulate his theory of translation and put it in a proper place in the history of American literary translation. Sedarat calls for a revision of assumptions about Ezra Pound as the first American appropriative translator and shows how Emerson's renderings and rhetorical theory anticipated this twentieth-century poet-translator. As the book asserts, translating Persian poetry despite illiteracy in the source language, subverting equivalence, aiming to render the spirit of the work instead of superficial literal meaning, appropriating/domesticating/Americanizing foreign predecessors, and using translation as a model for the poetic act are the main legacies of the Sage of Concord. Looking into the works of a number of contemporary translators and poets in two concluding chapters, Sedarat identifies the influence of Emerson's appropriative approach in them. Some of these translators—with the superficial, exaggerated practice of the conventions sanctioned by Emerson's renderings—have produced loose, unqualified translations of Hafez and Rumi. However, there are adept translators and poets such as Dick Davis and Aqa Shahid Ali whose works, according to Sedarat, reflect Emerson's corrective look to the East and attest to their genuine apprehension of the spirit and form of Persian poetry.

Beautifully written, *Emerson in Iran* is a delight to read. The criticism, in some passages, turns into the literary performance of Emerson's picturesque ideal language. The use of the lively, eye-catching imagery picked up from the works of Emerson and Persian poets connects the former, who believes in the visual root of language, to the latter, who work with images addressed

to the eye. As a poet-translator with Persian origins, Sedarat has been successful in illuminating how his preceding poet-translator could, through imitation and translation, integrate Persian poetry into his own poetry and rhetoric. This insightful research addresses itself not only to the Emersonians but also the students and scholars of comparative and world literature, translation studies, and the history of translation. Foregrounding the influence of Persian poets on the works of a seminal American writer and enlarging the Bloomian term “predecessor” to include foreign authors, the book is also noteworthy in the field of critical theory. However, I think it could have reached a still wider audience had the author provided more references to the Persian texts. Having access to Hafez through a few verses selected from Emerson’s appropriative translations, readers less familiar with Persian literature may fail to notice how far these poems are transformed through Emerson’s renderings or Americanized by the translators presented in the penultimate chapter. Moreover, *Emerson in Iran* could have better fulfilled the comprehensiveness promised by its title if it had included other Persian poets besides Sa’di and Hafez in its arguments. The book also has not given enough consideration to the domesticating behavior of the German translator. Although Sedarat is quite conscious of the changes made in the German version by von Hammer-Purgstall, his brief references to them may cause readers to ignore or underestimate them.

All in all, *Emerson in Iran* is a valuable contribution to Emerson scholarship and serves as an invitation for the reconsideration of this writer’s engagement with world literature, particularly with Persian poetry.

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