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**L'actif relationnel des langues,
littératures et cultures**

**Das Relationspotential von Sprachen,
Literaturen und Kulturen**

**The Relational Dynamics of Languages,
Literatures and Cultures**

Herausgegeben von / Dirigé par
Ute Heidmann
Michel Viegnes

AISTHESIS VERLAG

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The Persian Whitman
 Greybeard Sufi with something American in his Pocket
 Philip Gerard (Université de Lausanne)

Behnam M. Fomeshi, *The Persian Whitman: Beyond a Literary Reception*, Leiden, Leiden University Press, 2019, 200p.

Walt Whitman was never comfortable with the idea of finishing the sprawling poem that occupied him for four decades. “I announce an end,” he declares in the final section of *Leaves of Grass*, “that shall lightly and joyfully meet its translation¹.” Since that announcement, Whitman’s poem has been the object of countless translations, shaping the development of modern poetry across the Americas, Europe, Asia and the Middle East. In his eclectic, eye-opening monograph, Behnam M. Fomeshi focuses on one such history of translation, examining the circumstances and tracing the effects of Whitman’s reception in twentieth-century Iran. With conceptual tools drawn from new historicism and contemporary reception theory, Fomeshi presents several scenes from the life of the poet he calls “the Persian Whitman.” The Persian Whitman is a notional construct that Fomeshi invents to narrate this multivalent history of reception: an expatriated poet who changes his attitude and attire as modern Persian society transitions through periods of nationalism, quietism, and dissidence and as Persian poets reappraise, renew, and reject traditional poetic forms and subject matter. Fomeshi’s argument, thoroughly compelling if not strikingly original, is that the Persian Whitman emerges as the “outcome of a dialogue [...] between the Persian culture and the American poet” (p. 9). This dialogue, sustained now for nearly a century, is polyvocal, ironic, and often self-contradictory. Thus, Fomeshi notes that when he first crossed the border in 1922, “the Persian Whitman was a conventional Iranian modernist, not meddling with religion” (p. 168). Not so today. In the Islamic Republic, “the Persian Whitman is a modern poet-prophet” (p. 138). Fomeshi’s task is less to reconcile such divergences than to contextualize them. In this respect, *The Persian Whitman* does more than track the changes in Iran’s relationship to Western literature and American culture over the course of the twentieth century; it sketches the course of modern Persian poetry. The complexity of this history amply vindicates Fomeshi’s claim that the cultural landscape of modern Iran is anything but black and white. Even after 1979, modern Persian poetry “contains multitudes”, including multiple versions of Walt Whitman.

1 Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass: The Complete 2855 and 1891-92 Editions*. New York: Library of America, 2011. P. 610.

Fomeshi's argument unfolds over nine chapters that move through the history Whitman's Persian reception in loose chronological order. Fomeshi does not claim to provide an exhaustive account of Whitman's presence in Iran, and even readers unfamiliar with modern Persian poetry will likely sense the omissions. Cyrus Parham's 1960 translation, for example—the first book-length translation of Whitman into Persian—is curiously marginalized, and there is no discussion of Whitman's place in Iranian anthologies of English-language poetry. That said, Fomeshi's selectivity gives him the freedom to sample the wide variety of Iranian discourses that have laid claim to Whitman's name, image, or poetry. In this spirit, *The Persian Whitman* pairs the analysis of translations with the layered histories of what Fomeshi calls Whitman's "creative," "critical," and "political" receptions. Fomeshi's text moves deftly between the close reading of poems, the biographies of poets, the summery of political events, as well as discussions of various peritexts (book covers, prefaces, tables of contents) and epitexts (reviews, interviews, images). This sensitivity to Whitman's multiple Persian lives produces *The Persian Whitman's* particular critical traction and allows its author to lay out the subtle and not so subtle ways in which poets, translators, and critics have used Whitman alternately to contest or to shore up the authority of domestic literary movements and institutions. This is particularly the case after the Revolution, when "Occidentosis" is declared a threat to the Islamic Republic, and the image of "Walt Whitman, American, one of the roughs" is exchanged for the serene, non-threatening countenance of a Persian mystic.² The outfit, however, is often misleading. Although the beard and beatitude evoke a long-standing tradition of court poets, the Whitman of contemporary Iran does not toe the official line. "The laughing philosopher", Fomeshi remarks, "has something American in his hand, hidden in the pockets of his Persian costume, ready to be offered to the Persian audience" (p. 160).

Fomeshi notes in the introduction to *The Persian Whitman* that the subsequent chapters can be profitably read in any order. This is a virtue of his text, which, at the cost of some repetition, permits the reader to enter and exit where they please. The first three chapters are devoted to Whitman's American contexts, to the editorial history of *Leaves of Grass*, and to the key features of its poetics. The discussion focuses on topics that become important for Whitman's Persian reception: democracy, modernization, nationalism, free verse, etc. This principle of selection unfortunately precludes meaningful treatments of Whitman's use of homoerotic imagery, his complex views on slavery, or his defense of gender equality. Although selective, these three chapters cover familiar terrain, and readers acquainted with the scholarship of David Reynolds or Gay Wilson Allens may safely jump ahead to the more groundbreaking work of the chapters that follow.

2 Cf. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (as note 18). P. 50.

Chapter 4 moves from nineteenth-century America to early twentieth-century Iran, where, in 1922, the critic Mīrzā Yūsif Khān I'tisām Mulk Ashṭiyānī publishes a partial translation of “The Song of the Broad Axe” in his journal *Bahar*. Associated with the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911), *Bahar* was a major organ for the dissemination of Enlightenment ideas in translation as well as a forum for a new, democratic discourse modelled on Western and above all French precedents. I'tisāmī's translation at once partakes in the era's progressive spirit and reveals that spirit's limitations. Thus, whereas “The Song of the Broad Axe” becomes an important source for the *topos* of the modern city in Persian poetry, other elements of Whitman's poem do not translate. Citizenship, for example, posed problems for the fledgling constitutional movement, as did Whitman's Quaker-infused religiosity and progressive attitudes on gender. Indeed, Fomeshi's discussion of self-censorship in I'tisāmī's translation reveals how poetry's much-debated “untranslatability” is far more complex a phenomenon than formalists would have us believe. In the Persian context, untranslatability is at once historically situated and ethically and politically implicated, forcing us to consider not only what *can* be translated but also what *may* or *ought to* be translated.

Chapter 5 turns to Whitman's contribution to the emergence of poetic modernism in Iran and particularly to his significance for the poet Nīmā Yūshij, who pioneered Persian New Poetry in the 1930s and 1940s. Fomeshi observes that Nīmā cited Whitman's free verse to defend his own departures from classical meters and verse forms. Indeed, for Fomeshi, when Nīmā applauds Whitman for developing a “poetry free from the manacle of meter and rhyme” (quoted on p. 95), Nīmā is in fact praising his own innovations—an argument that moves Fomeshi to claim that “Whitman was a *nom de plume* for Nīmā himself” (p. 97). Of course, given that only one translation of Whitman's verse existed in Persian at the time, Nīmā nominated himself spokesperson for a nearly silent poet. Nonetheless, his association with Whitman stuck, such that Nīmā's New Poetry became what Haun Saussy would call Whitman's Persian “sponsor”, the principal mediator of his Iranian reception.³ Or, in Fomeshi's words, “Persian-speaking people tend to look at Whitman through Nīmā or the other way around” (p. 115).

Chapters 6, 7, and 8, pursue Whitman's subsequent reception along three other axes, examining how Whitman's imagery fused with the traditional *topoi* of Iranian poetry, how his example figured in the leftist intellectual milieu of the 1940s and 1950s, and how, after the Revolution, his image was inducted into an iconographic tradition of poet-mystics. Chapter 6 presents Whitman's “The Noiseless Patient Spider” as an intertext informing Parvīn I'tisāmī's revision of the *munāzīrah* genre in her 1941 poem “God's Weaver.”

³ See Haun Saussy, *Translation as Citation: Zhuangzi Inside Out*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

In a fascinating if somewhat speculative reading, Fomeshi argues that Parvīn, Iran's first major woman poet, "cross bred" the spiders of traditional Persian poetry with the industrious insect of Whitman's poem to produce a feminine image of the poet-weaver without precedent in Persian literature. The seventh and next chapter leaves the literary bestiary for the heady political milieu of postwar Iran. It focuses on the intellectual Ihsān Tabarī. Tabarī cemented the connection between Nīmā and Whitman, defending the former and translating the latter for the pages of the leftist journal *Nāmi-yi Mardum*, and thereby establishing a political reading of both poets in Iran. Chapter 8 leaps from the mid-century reception ahead to post-Revolutionary Iran and the politics of Whitman's image within Islamic Republic. Somewhat like the myth of the "good gray poet" that Whitman cultivated late in life to offset the image of the confrontational, open-shirted tough of his youth, after the Iranian Revolution, Whitman's relationship to Nīmā's politically engaged, oppositional poetry was suppressed and his affinities with the apolitical, mystical tradition of Sipihrī and Rūmī emphasized. Fomeshi's argument focuses on the public image put forward by two book covers from the 2010s; sadly, there is no extended discussion of how Whitman's evocation of the "greybeard sufi, [...] in the teeming Persian rose-garden" from his late poem "A Persian Lesson" already anticipates this appropriation.⁴ Nonetheless, the short tour through the history of representations of the "laughing philosopher" is well executed and sets the stage for *The Persian Whitman's* important, final turn.

Fomeshi devotes chapter 9 to Persian Whitman's post-2009 avatars. These pages are the most sophisticated and rewarding analyses in the monograph, and Fomeshi uses them to introduce complexities only hinted at before. As Fomeshi notes early on, one of the paradoxes of Whitman's Iranian reception is that despite the institutionalization of anti-Western discourse in 1979, "Whitman is even more strongly present in this post-Revolutionary period than in the previous period" (p. 6). According to Fomeshi, Persian Whitman's surprising vitality is explained by his ability to contain contradictions. More specifically, by wrapping their translations in the familiar iconography of the non-threatening "laughing philosopher", Whitman's contemporary translators have been able to insinuate a dissenting, democratic, and anti-dogmatic discourse between the covers and in the margins of their editions. Emblematic of this layering of discourses is the back cover of Farid Ghadami's 2010 translation, which features an excerpt from "Song of the Open Road". Typically, Persian texts are justified on the right margin. The quoted verses from Ghadami's translation – verses celebrating freedom of movement and independence of thought, lines that break from the Islamic Republic's "official line" – are pointedly justified on the *left*.

4 Cf. Whitman. *Leaves of Grass* (as note 18). P. 650.

As instructive as such introductions to the competing cultural and political discourses of contemporary Iran are, they also point to *The Persian Whitman's* two greatest shortcomings. The first of these – all the more baffling given his commitment to careful historicization – is Fomeshi's tendency *not* to introduce the secondary sources from which he quotes. The reader must consult the endnotes to learn whose biography of Whitman, whose assessment of Western democracy, or whose summary of the Iranian Writers' Congress they are reading. The cumulative effect of such neglect is a dehistoricization that runs counter to *The Persian Whitman's* stated aims. The study's second weakness lies in its refusal to follow the discourses it studies beyond the boundaries of modern Iran. While this reader certainly sympathizes with Fomeshi's intention to follow Persian Whitman beyond the walls of American Studies, he regrets that there was not more attention to Whitman's engagement with the contested frontiers of his own nation and his profound sensitivity to the violence that such borders both provoke and contain. Of the American Civil War, Whitman once wrote, "my book and the war are one."⁵ Whitman's nationalism matured into a deep commitment to the Union cause that resonates uncannily with the civil conflicts that once again threaten to undo the American Republic. Although Fomeshi situates Whitman's democratic poetry in relation to the politics of Iran's "Green Revolution", he fails to reflect on Whitman's ongoing relevance in the country of his birth. At stake here is not the repatriation of the Whitman to his "native" land but the fresh perspective that Whitman's *Persian* reception casts on his *American* legacy. If Fomeshi delivers on his promise to offer us a *Persian* Whitman, his book has yet to realize the *globalization* of American literature evoked in his introduction. And yet, it is to Fomeshi's credit that his compelling monograph leaves no doubt about how promising the study of *global* Whitman would be. Fomeshi shows us that the global Whitman is a multitudinous Whitman, a poet whose contradictions necessitate a profoundly comparative approach. In the end, this is not an *other* Whitman. In the end, it is the Whitman who promised to "lightfully and joyfully meet [his] translation." It is *Vält Vitman*, "greybeard sufi" with an American broad axe under his robe, a kaleidoscope, "a kosmos."

5 Cf. Whitman. *Leaves of Grass* (as note 18). P. 168.