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Ralph Waldo Emerson’s interest in Persian poetry has long been a widely acknowledged, though politely neglected, topic in Emerson studies. Too often, Emerson’s deep regard for the thirteenth and fourteenth century Persian poets Sa’dī and Hafez appear as short asides in critical studies chiefly focused on other aspects of his oeuvre. In offering a book-length study of Emerson’s fascination with these Persian poets, Sedarat steps up where other scholars have side-stepped. This contribution is especially useful for the many scholars of world literature whose primary interest has been the Persophilic dimension of Emerson’s writing, to use Hamid Dabashi’s term for describing the mass appeal that Persian literature had within non-Persian speaking societies, particularly across Europe. For many scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, exposing this oft-forgotten and undervalued influence of Islamicate and Persianate materials in transatlantic writing is half the task. In addition to recovering the intellectual territory of Persian philosophy in US romanticism, *Emerson in Iran* suggests that just as national canons develop distinct styles of expression, so too can they cultivate unique styles of reception. In Sedarat’s assessment, a uniquely American flair for appropriation—which can be spied in so many instances of comparative reading—owes special credit to Emerson’s engagements with Persian poetry and the national attitudes toward translation that it sets in motion.

The primary contribution Sedarat makes is the demonstration of how strains of Islamic influence get embedded into Emerson’s writing so neatly as to become nearly invisible to the untrained eye. He describes this vanishing act as an “American appropriation”, though “appropriation” here does not seem to carry as harsh a charge as it does, say, in much contemporary public commentary on the commodification of minority culture by white artists and celebrities. In part, the potential bite of “appropriation” is softened through Sedarat’s explanation of how the Persian materials that Emerson consumed also promoted transcendent perspectives on the writerly self. The first half of this argument rests on explaining the dual—often conflated—sources for Emerson’s “all-encompassing transparency” (90). As Sedarat plots it out, Emerson was reading widely in Greek philosophy and history at around the same time that he was first becoming acquainted with Persian poetry, primarily through Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall’s German translations. This synchronic meeting of Greek and Persian materials led Emerson to compare the similarities between East and West, particularly those concepts within Sufi philosophy, like “Unity of Being,” which were “analogous” (26) or “parallel” (64) to the
universalizing impulses behind Platonism and Neoplatonism. In Sedarat’s reading, these mutually corroborating sources alchemize within Emerson’s scholarship to produce the Adamic vision that his writing routinely displays and that can best be encapsulated by his metaphor of the transparent eyeball.

The second—more rewarding—half of Sedarat’s argument surrounding Emerson’s appropriative relationship to Hafez and Sa’dī lies in tying together the concept of *fana* (or ego sublimation) with the boundary-blurring act of imitative writing. While a chapter title like “Imitation as Suicide” might seem to be taking a punitive attitude toward imitative writing, Sedarat’s chapter turns the assumption on its head by drawing from some more positive varieties of fatalism to be found in the Sufi concept of *fana*. In Sufi philosophy, the drive toward self-negation connoted by *fana* is a route toward mystical union with the divine—a bright and ecstatic telos rather than the kind of dark, tragic end we typically associate with suicide. Sedarat’s explanation of how the ego-diminishing desire of *fana* gets transmuted into Emerson’s writing through his Persian models is an exciting addition to debates on literary influence. However complementary, its conception of literary association differs from the more egocentric paradigm of influence that Harold Bloom famously sketched out in *Anxiety of Influence* nearly a half-century ago. Bloom’s theory of *daemonization*, which holds that writers sublimate the influences of their predecessors by “de-individuating the precursor” (88), is driven by an unconscious desire to shore up their own literary stature. The Sufi explanation of such a union between minds is explained more in terms of admiration and shared divine truths. While Sedarat’s description of Emerson’s engagement with Persian poetry as “appropriation” does not align itself exclusively with the Sufi model, it makes room for the more ego-diminishing, rather than ego-aggrandizing, prospects of literary influence.

Some of the most refreshing segments of Sedarat’s writing concern the twentieth-century populizers of classical Persian poetry—Coleman Barks, Daniel Ladinsky and Matt Rohrer—whose looser translations continue to dominate the market of Sufi translations, at least commercially speaking. In Sedarat’s view, the equivalating method that Emerson inaugurated grows wilder in this subsequent generation of translators. These latter versions notably resemble Ezra Pound’s translucent modernist style. Yet where Pound’s invisible use of intermediary translations has become a renowned technique of anglophone modernism, Emerson’s earlier iteration of just such an approach to translation is less remembered. Sedarat traces the stamp of Emerson’s method in Barks and Ladinsky in part to resituate Emerson as the precursor of the imagist moment and its monumental place in the history of American translation. Such an attempt to recover the effects of nineteenth-century Persophilia—which was so heady in its own moment yet seems to vanish without a trace by the twentieth century—in American writing is
valuable, even if the argument rests, at times, a little too heavily on a teleological vision of literary development.

Although Emerson’s twentieth-century antecedents share his appropriative approach to translation, Sedarat finds fewer redeeming qualities for these latter translators. He describes the liberties that Ladinsky takes in *The Gift* as “adulterations” (150) and “insultingly simple” (152), and one of Barks’s translations of Hafiz as “edited down to fit on a bumper sticker” (168). I must confess that while I agree Ladinsky’s versions breezily dismiss some of the original contours of Hafez’s original (often at the expense of cultural and philosophical complexity), I like them. Just as I like the idea that Hafez’s verse might be reincarnated as some trite bumper sticker, riding along the Pacific Coast Highway next to a vanity license plate that might read “YO2GAGRL.” Part of the thrill of relay translation is the sheer range of audiences that various versions invite into conversation. Oftentimes, loose—though commercially successful—translations act as gateway poems for readers that go on toward more scholarly approaches to Sufi writing. Ladinsky’s *The Gift* had this very effect on me when I was in high school.

One aspect of blurring—even appropriation—that is Sedarat’s own is his choice of “Iran” as the significant geography through which to understand the influence of Persianate (rather than Persian) materials to US literary culture. In fact, the term *Persianate*, which would have been especially useful for Sedarat’s analysis of Agha Shahid Ali’s reception, is missing altogether. Its advantage is that the term acknowledges the hybridizing effect that Persian language culture had for centuries on non-Persian cultures and languages outside of the territories that constitute modern-day Iran. Sedarat writes, for example, of “Shahid-Ali’s twentieth-century introduction of the Persian ghazal to America” (175) as if the Urdu ghazal (which was Ali’s primary model for ghazal writing) had not yet distinguished itself as a unique chapter in the long history of ghazal as world poetic form. While the Urdu ghazal undoubtedly developed out of the Persian model, the Persian ghazal emerged from the Arabic tradition in turn. Ali clearly refers to these Arabic origins of form and philosophy in his poetry, often through footnotes, as well as in the critical introduction to his anthology of American ghazal, *Ravishing Disunities*. Moreover, while Ali repeatedly wrote of the “Persian and Urdu ghazal,” accentuating the distinctness of each, Sedarat mentions Urdu only in reference to Nishat Zaidi’s analysis of Ali’s ghazals. Perhaps Sedarat emphasizes Iran in part because Emerson too held a particularly nationalized view of the Persian poets in question, as did most nineteenth-century European and US scholars. Yet Hafez and Sa’di held canonical positions throughout the territories of Asia where Persian operated as a lingua franca (Near East, Central Asia and North India) for centuries, and still do. It is through this Indic, and less appropriative, web of “relay translations” that a second wave of Persianate literary culture arrives in America, through Agha Shahid Ali. And if we zoom in on the figures that Ali and his
cadre of poet-friends reference, South Asian writers like Mirza Ghalib and Faiz Ahmad Faiz find more mention than Hafez or Sa’dī. The ghazal neither begins “etymologically” in Iran, nor arrives on US soil with Persian (let alone Iran) as its last port of departure (192). By glossing over these translingual shifts (from Arabic to Persian to Urdu), Sedarat’s history of the American ghazal is made more streamlined but loses sight of the breathtaking cosmopolitanism of the ghazal, especially as it was wielded by Agha Shahid Ali.

Even so, Emerson in Iran has much to offer the fields of translation studies, world literature, and American studies. Sedarat’s ability to infuse the hermetic focus of the close reading method—his primary mode—with concepts from Sufi philosophy is particularly advantageous. And though he concentrates primarily on exchanges between English and Persian writing, Sedarat’s interest in the use of relay translation also brings even more languages—Urdu, German, and Arabic—into view. Revealing these international currents behind a figure as lionized in the US canon as Emerson is especially worthwhile now that the allure of indigeneity has captivated so many Americans in new and unpredictable ways.