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Middle Eastern-American Literature: A Contemporary Turn in Emerson Studies

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MIDDLE EASTERN—AMERICAN LITERATURE:
A CONTEMPORARY TURN IN EMERSON STUDIES

AS A SCHOLAR OF Arab literature importantly qualified at a conference on Ameen Rihani's *The Book of Khalid*, the first Arab-American novel published in the United States, "Middle Eastern" and "American" should always be put in quotes, as they remain especially problematic conceptual references to complicated regions and literary traditions. Insofar as they link together, first with Emerson's early appropriation of Persian poetry and then through the later return of Emerson as an influence on Middle Eastern—American writers like Rihani, the quotes on both sides of the hyphenated conflation ought to further end with curved arrows. More than referencing mere reciprocal relations, such circularity better foregrounds the emergence of an ambiguously hybrid literature that tends to resist identification owing to a critical tendency to privilege one side of the dichotomous relation over the other. Emerson's writing, underpinned in part by Persian verse that he translated through intermediary German renderings, offers perhaps the best place to begin examining the formative effects of an emerging American literary engagement with the Middle East, which in turn have come to transform early texts like Rihani's novel, as well as later Middle Eastern—American writing.

Two disparate critical approaches in this chapter attempt to more closely follow Emerson's borrowing from the Persian tradition, circling back to the origins of one of many important transnational sources for stylistic and thematic inspiration. First, Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* allows for a conceptual framework from which to consider the formative effects of Persian poetry, both on Emerson's verse as well as his influence on later Middle Eastern—American writers. Bloom's theory, predicated on psychoanalysis, offers a way to further investigate how Emerson attempts to overcome important Persian predecessors, one of whom, Sa'di, he deems the ideal poetic father in a poem titled with his name.¹ Following Bloom by

considering Emerson as the prophet of “the American Sublime” (103) under the category of “Daemonization”—which consists of a radical attempt to negate predecessors—better allows for a critical understanding of Emerson’s attempt to claim a kind of “first priority” as self-appointed American Adam, even when confronting a more than one-thousand-year-old Persian tradition. To disavow the “sepulchers of the fathers” (CW 1:7) mentioned in the introduction to *Nature*, Emerson of course must reckon with several Western and Eastern influences. Bloom’s theory especially helps to reveal the irreconcilable paradox of Emerson’s insistence on the centrality of his vision, best exemplified by the “transparent eye-ball” in his “Nature” chapter. His textual sully of the self-proclaimed, all-seeing transparency by his reporting on it corresponds to an essential wrestling of spirit with letter in the classical Persian poetry that he would come to discover in his later career and translate, as well as imitate, with great interest. Interrogating Emerson’s trope of the all-encompassing eye that seems to obviate literary predecessors in turn allows for further consideration of hybrid Middle Eastern–American writers who attempt to follow Emerson’s example, though with the added weight of their substantial foreign traditions, since the start of the twentieth century.

More than merely accounting for literary influence, Bloom’s theory helps to extend a more substantial argument into Emerson’s problematic linguistic rendering of Persian poetry from German intermediary texts. Translation of course resists a unifying theory, given the unique process of rendering specific source texts into another literary tradition with its own disparate qualities. Yet the author as imitator/translator, regardless of language or tradition, must surely reconcile literary influence in his or her own writing, if not in the translation as well. As Willis Barnstone has argued in response to Bloom in *The Poetics of Translation*, “the influence of translation in the work of poet translators occurs not so much because of their encounter with an extraordinary source text but through their own transformation of that source text into their own invented language.”² For the purposes of this investigation, Bloom allows for a comparative analysis of poetics beyond close linear comparisons between Emerson and his Persian predecessors found in earlier Emerson scholarship, helping to demonstrate how Emerson had to reckon with the poetry originating in Iran that he transformed into English through German Romanticism.³ Though following the same kind of radical breaking with tradition indicative of Bloom’s American sublime, because this foreign influence remains so latent in Emerson’s writing, it warrants special attention.

As productive as Bloom’s theory becomes in reconciling an important transnational influence on Emerson’s writing, however, it falls short in offer-

ing a means by which to interrogate the crossing of influence between two rather different worlds inhabited by vastly different literary conventions, cultural practices, and languages. The majority of examples offered in Bloom's influential book focus exclusively on Western models. The Greek terms themselves, as well as the Freudian model that informs the entire theory, demonstrate a proclivity toward Western literary and philosophic origins. Subtly, much like the way that the anglicizing of names in translations of the Bible comes to render away the importance of Jewish culture, Bloom begins to reproduce a kind of Oedipal breaking from the plethora of more foreign traditions and languages that precede and heavily inform the English literature he favors. This in turn reinforces, if not condones, the modernist move of translation as appropriation established so firmly by Ezra Pound in the early twentieth century. If only to foreground a discursive space to serve as a continual reminder that writers accommodating the work of others from different traditions do not merely attempt to reckon with the influence of foreign writing into their own rhetoric but have their own texts transformed into something new, further theoretical understanding that accommodates difference appears necessary.

To this end, this chapter juxtaposes Homi Bhabha's postcolonial concept of a "third space of enunciation" with a Bloomian analysis of influence anxiety. Applied mainly to traditional formations of hybrid literature, Bhabha's "third space" is understood as the circle embodied by the colonizer's culture and all it entails (language, tradition, etc.) that intersects with part of a circle from the colonized world. The intersection of the circles thus becomes a formative third space, embodying the synthesis of different traditions that transform into something new.⁴ Such a site of meaning and stylistic reformation proves antithetical to idealized conceptions of a homogenous tradition. Though Emerson's writing engages other languages and traditions into English, insofar as it does not explicitly emerge as a hybrid transformation between disparate literatures, admittedly it fails to qualify as a "third space" according to Bhabha.⁵ Nevertheless, such an approach paradoxically more closely identifies the underpinnings of world literatures in the American tendency to appropriate and render invisible much of the foreign that very much originates with Emerson's predilection to incorporate all he sees into a kind of "colonizing consciousness." Intersecting Bhabha's theory with Bloom's, as if in a new kind of third space, allows for further speculation as to how Emerson's voice, predicated on visionary language, might derive at least in part from elsewhere, outlining the presence of a formative influence that otherwise remains hidden. As such, it begins to make visible Emerson's seemingly transparent claims on a first priority that dissemble important sources outside his assumed sphere of influence. Bhabha's interpretation on

the disruptive presence of postcolonial hybrid literature, which, “reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power” (159–60), offers a means to interrogate both the effect of Emerson’s vision on Middle Eastern–American writers and their response to it.

Though Emerson’s early book *Nature* predates his deep reading, translating, and rhetorical modeling of Persian poets like Hafez and Sa’di,⁶ reconsideration of arguably its most seminal passage of the invisible eyeball reveals a contained textual site that leads toward a rather unconventional yet potentially productive understanding of how he anticipated a Middle Eastern influence, as if to have subsumed it as his own. It becomes the origin of origins, alpha and omega of an American claim to an illusory first priority. Predicated on the longing for an all-seeing vision, much like the Persian verse he would come to read, his transformation into proclaimed invisibility offers the most essential and primary “first circle” in Emerson’s cosmic circular view, wherein “The eye,” as Emerson’s “Circles” essay begins, constitutes the “first circle” through which the other circles emanate (*CW* 2:179). Insofar as Emerson attempts to obviate the text of its own reporting, as if the transparency occurs in real time beyond the naming of it, he of course keeps literary precursors out of sight. However, when viewing the trace or outline of the eyeball as a kind of Bhabhaian “third space,” the following well-known excerpt presents a new way of understanding the latent role of unforeseen influences such as Persian verse in Emerson’s first claim on literary tradition: “Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. . . . Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (*CW* 1:10).

By paradoxically foregrounding himself as a circle devoid of center, Emerson introduces a central passage for a discussion of illusory influence. Recently Lawrence Buell, partly responding to the scholarship of Wai Chee Dimock, has called for moving the discussion of Persian verse as an influence on Emerson “from the edges of discussion” and more toward “the center.”⁷ Quite tellingly, Paul Kane, in his comparative study of Hafez and Emerson, has expressed doubt about so positioning Persian poetry in the center, remarking, “I’m not convinced there is a center, or at least a stable one” (134). In part to extend the close correspondence of the letter in Persian verse in Emerson’s writing to the spirit of Persian influence, Kane begins to show how the foreign verse remains latently elusive for the Amer-

ican poet-philosopher, helping to explain a problematic critical tendency to limit comparative analyses between Emerson's specific translations of Persian poetry and his own verse. Considering instead the interconnectedness of Emerson's poetry and prose to the fourteenth-century classical Persian poet, Hafez, Kane demonstrates a more subtle yet pervasive influence of the Persian tradition on Emerson's sensibility beyond a line-by-line analysis of translations or Emerson's imitations of Persian verse as offered by J. D. Yohannan. Arguing that Emerson appreciated Hafez as a bridge between the secular and the spiritual, he stresses that the American followed the Iranian in part because Hafez kept mysticism from becoming a mere static concept in his poetry. It remains "vehicular" (119), much like the functioning of metaphor. Such a de-centered literary analysis leads Kane to assert that Emerson became especially attracted to Hafez for his spirit of self-reliance, insofar as he asserted a liberating power within the confines of a religious context (119).

Kane's most original claim, which provides a point of departure for this chapter when applied to the passage above, connects Emerson's liberation through self-reduction to Leonard Lewisohn's observation of *malāmātī*, or self-censure, found in the Sufi mysticism that underpins much of the verse by Hafez.⁸ Drawing on Lewisohn's citation from Emerson's "Self-Reliance" essay for a comparable Western analogue to explain Hafez,⁹ Kane compares it with the inversion of power found in the *rend*, which diminishes self-importance in the Persian poet's attempt to challenge hypocrisy.¹⁰ Further referencing the description of Hafez in Emerson's journals, he notes how this could easily serve as Emerson's self-reliant man: "He fears nothing, he sees too far, he sees throughout."¹¹ Kane's analysis astutely predicates his reading of the *rend* in the vision of both writers: "The Emersonian *rend*, like Hafiz, is fearless because he *sees*; he is a visionary in both a religious and secular sense: the clarity of his perception penetrates the world" (123).

The metaphorical or "vehicular" nature of Hafez's de-centered verse, combined with the positioning of the diminished self through the *rend*, which, like Hafez, Kane finds operating in Emerson "through a disinterested and visionary gaze" (122) offers an alternative turn in transnational Emerson studies, wherein the respective Persian and American traditions can be read as transforming, through an alternative third space, an originating and elusively emerging hybrid voice that seemingly claims complete rejection of any influence whatsoever. Arguably the greatest and most paradoxically liberating self-reduction that resists a "centering" presence for Emerson is found in his self-proclaimed transformation into transparency. Though the publication of this passage predates Emerson's close reading of Hafez by roughly five years, it seems to anticipate the Persian master's presence upon

the American landscape. The *rend* for Emerson, connected to vision, occurs here, as dramatized in his own time by the publication of a famous cartoon lampooning the writer's outlandish transformative claim, depicting him as a mere eyeball on stick legs. Following Kane's analysis of the *rend*, such a caricature embodies comparable self-diminishing moves by Hafez, the Persian poet most translated by Emerson, as seen in such lines that Emerson himself brought into English from his German source: "I am: what I am / My dust will be again."¹²

The passage of the transparent eyeball can therefore be viewed as providing an outline from which to further interrogate foreign influence, wherein the foregrounding of Emerson's consciousness via invisibility as American Adam intersects by attempting to subsume all tradition he would absorb. Though a multitude of Western influences remain present here,¹³ the quoted passage amalgamates a host of traditions that can be seen as including the poet Hafez, especially as it predicates the *rend* of the Sufi mystic upon vision. Significantly, Hafez was called in Arabic at the time of his death the "tongue of the invisible world," paradoxically articulating that which could not be seen. Such a metaphor that gives voice to the invisible closely resembles the function of Emerson's transparent eyeball that became a primary statement on an attempt to transcend self-identification. Emerson's personal veneration of Hafez reinforces such a comparison, especially as he references the Persian poet as a master of vision: "Hafez is not to be scared by a name, or a religion. He fears nothing. He sees too far; he sees throughout. . . . Such is the only man I wish to see and to be" (*JMN* 10:165).

Such a description closely imitates the stated function of Emerson's transparent eyeball, which, explains James Cox, involves not so much merely seeing the material world but attempting to see through it.¹⁴ Ultimately, Hafez and Emerson rhetorically wrestle with the materiality of language itself as they seek to visually transform into something like pure agency. Ego-reduction becomes a function of metaphorical invisibility. Such is the essence of Sufi mysticism as experienced in classical Persian verse.

To exemplify this comparative analysis on Emerson's and Hafez's own metaphorical terms, consider the following lines (translated by Emerson through Joseph von Hammer's German rendering): "Take my heart in thy hand, O beautiful boy of Schiraz! / I would give for the mole on thy cheek Samarcand and Buchara!" (259). Following the spirit of the *rend*, the mystic vision of classical Persian poetry, like Emerson's transformation upon the winter New England landscape, attempts to see all through the sacrifice of self. According to legend, Tamerlane, a native of Samarkand, confronted Hafez for the blasphemy of offering his land for the mole of the beloved's face. Hafez is said to have replied, "Your Majesty, it is because of such prod-

igality that I have fallen into such poverty.”¹⁵ Such self-inflicted poverty for mystic vision in Sufi poetry exemplifies, through the trope of the mole, the return to the most primal source of material origins in search of the spirit. As Florence Lederer writes in the introduction to another Persian poet in the same tradition as Hafez, “The mole on the cheek is the point of indivisible Unity,” adding that “the heart and soul of Adam evolved from there.”¹⁶ Syed Mumtaz Ali’s description of the mole for Sufis could just as well apply to Emerson’s eyeball, or at least to the reductive material foundation from which it emerges: “The mole on her face signif[ies] that when the pupil, at times, beholds the total absence of all worldly want on the part of the preceptor, he also abandons all the desires of both worlds—he perhaps even goes so far as to desire nothing else in life than his preceptor.”¹⁷

In another poem by Hafez, the mole becomes a mirror of the perceiver’s pupil: “Her cheek’s a mirror of all my vision / My pupil in her mole is seen (subtly).”¹⁸ Like the paradoxically opaque mole on the face of the beloved that opens to a seemingly infinite world for Hafez, Emerson experiences his visionary transformation to an Adamic state devoid of influence on a dirty puddle that appears to metonymically displace the pupil as part of his entry into an all-seeing transparency. The “common” landscape that Emerson crosses, as well as the smaller microcosm of space in the puddle where he stands, gets subsumed by the comprehensive vision of the eye, an inversion of his expanding “Circles” essay wherein the eye as first circle goes out to define the world.

Emerson’s “first circle” in the nineteenth century of course fails to originate an all-knowing Adamic vision. Attempting to transcend predecessors, it paradoxically replicates the kind of fundamental wrestling with the materiality of language found in classical Persian verse. His attempt to embody the spirit that would overcome the letter through the metaphor of invisibility, which would obviate metaphor itself, finds a comparable analogue in Rumi’s famous declaration that the poetry he recited at best became a poor metaphor for the experience of the divine. Considering the self-reducing *rend* in this visionary context, it is as though Emerson has sunk all of his “mean egotism” into that displaced puddle, much like the Sufi goes searching through the mole of the beloved via a reduction of beauty to its most reduced state. His transcendent individuation emerges from his attempt to repress his ego by burrowing, like a mole, into the earth (with its etymological origins of “humility”) as an American Adam, demonstrating the Bloomian counter-sublime through his claim to see through all of creation.

Extending such a theoretically comparative reading between the Persian tradition that Emerson appears to anticipate, the transparent eyeball passage stylistically mirrors the Persian tradition at the level of pun, upon

which the verse of Hafez that Emerson would come to translate and imitate thrives. Puns in classical Persian poetry, especially in the verse of Hafez, liberate as they contain, as if trying, like Emerson's attempt at transparency, to out-metaphorize the metaphor they posit. Donald Pease effectively deconstructs the essence of Emerson's punning to show how the eyeball ultimately becomes an originating metaphor from which the process of metaphor emerges: "The eyeball is trans-parent, trans-individual, trans-objective . . . undefinable as either subject or object, God or nature . . . like the living glance exchanged when God and nature look face to face."¹⁹ Pease inadvertently offers here perhaps the best description for Persian Sufi poetry, invested in paradoxically liberating yet confining puns that frequently tend to read the book of nature as divine.

In an essay on the difficulty of translating Hafez, Dick Davis cites a representative pun from the Persian tradition by Masud Sa'd: "Nalam bedel chu nai man andar hesar-e nai." As Davis writes, "Only in Persian can this line be evocative. The pun is on the word *nai*, which means a reed flute, and also alludes to the name of a fortress used as a prison. Hence the line means, 'While I am (imprisoned) in *nai* (the fortress), I complain in my heart like a *nai* (reed flute).'"²⁰ The freedom in the ethereal song (which occurs, in Persian, at the level of sound in the reading of lines from contained couplets) remains predicated on physical captivity.

To take an even more essential, and perhaps more Emersonian, example from the verse of Hafez, the following ghazal couplet basically defines wine through the repetition of *ast*, meaning "is," a state-of-being verb upon which the intoxicating illusion of the jars that contain it remains predicated: "Through intoxication, all in tumult and shout are the jars / And that wine in that place true is, not illusory, is."²¹ Tellingly, Emerson interpreted Hafez's use of wine, an especially ubiquitous trope in the Persian tradition that Iranian critics continue to interrogate,²² as a claim on intellectual freedom, as evidenced by his famous imitation of Hafez's poem in his own "Bacchus."²³ Paul Kane rightly points out Emerson's suspicion of mysticism, citing his use of wine more to embody a spirit of a self-reliant "power and liberty" (119). Equally dismissive of the kind of fatalism in the Persian tradition,²⁴ which derives in part from a culture informed by Shia' Islam, Emerson in his own introductory essay for a collection of Persian verse in translation explicitly praises Hafez for his individual rebellion against religious strictures, his challenging of hypocrisy as he "tears off his turban and throws it at the head of the meddling dervis" (116). This tension between the exertions of a kind of self-reliance within the confines of an established system of organized morality exemplifies both the verse of Hafez as well as the philosophy of Emerson. In the previously quoted texts from both authors, the trans-

parent eye, like the wine jars, proves illusive as well as allusive through the agency of Emerson's ego, yet through a kind of intoxicating transcendence of "eye" over "I," wherein he becomes "glad to the brink of fear," and the illusion vanishes. As Kenneth Burke reveals, for Emerson all of nature becomes a crossing of matter into spirit, wherein the "I" is lost.²⁵ Such a summation could easily apply to the Persian verse Emerson studied, to the extent that it functions upon a visual *rend* in relation to language through the loss of self to the beloved as metaphor for the divine.

In another context, Kane compares the ghazal, the principal lyric form of Iranian verse, consisting of disparate couplets linked through style as opposed to theme (the form in which the previously excerpted Hafez quotations were originally written), to the tension between Emerson's epigraphs and the essays to which they seem disjointedly attached (130-32). Often a given speaker in the ghazal, much like the litany of quoted voices in Emerson's essays, gets positioned with a dialogic tension between other preceding voices. The inherent nature of the ghazal invites such intertextual interjections of lines from, among many sources, the Qur'an or from other poets (via a received set of common tropes in the literary tradition, actual poetic lines, various historical allusions, etc.), much in the way that Kane shows Emerson disjointedly positing established quotations as epigraphs to which he both responds as well as thematically resists by breaking away from the originating point, often merely picking it up, like the ghazal, in a random place. Pease has tellingly observed how "Emerson turns his writing into the equivalent of quoting," an apt summation of the classical Persian masters of the ghazal form who, also like Emerson, quote themselves to increase dialogical tension as they seemingly also distance themselves from fixed subjectivity.

By calling out the ego and naming himself as an invisible presence in the early passage from "Nature," Emerson can further be seen as demonstrating the Persian ghazal's convention of "signing" a final couplet with the poet's name or persona. This stylistic predilection proves especially significant in both traditions. In the Persian form, the brief series of disjointed couplets concludes with the poet's ego (or at least the performance of it), which, like Emerson's naming of "mean egotism" paradoxically gets undercut by self-diminishment, as seen in the aforementioned translation by Emerson wherein Hafez reduces his name to dust. This common self-*rending* via self-referencing helps to exemplify Ricardo Miguel-Alfonso's observation of how Emerson differs from European influences "by a greater acceptance or affirmation of discontinuities of self."²⁶ Emerson, as a speaker foregrounding his presence in an attempt to transcend it, follows a pattern of ego-disruption through the interposition of other voices in both Emerson as well

as Hafez, wherein objectifying a variety of disparate and foreign texts helps to disrupt a subjective presence. “When ‘I’ quote, then ‘I’ am speaking by another who speaks through me when I assume his word,” writes Pease.²⁷ Such a rhetorical strategy in the ghazal as well as in Emerson’s prose reflects, then, another means for the *rend*. The self literally as well as visually disappears from the text, at least at significant moments. The elision of ego in turn mirrors both Emerson’s prose and the ghazal’s tendency to suspend meaning as though through recurring ellipses, wherein gaps of meaning between sentences and couplets invite, if not trap, the reader into that same sense of ego-absence that relays such an inexplicable spiritual tone. This becomes yet another means of a “de-centering” rhetorical practice for Emerson. At significant turns, it coincides with the intersection of a somewhat unrecognized, as if invisible, sphere of Persian influence.

Emerson clears space in the American landscape as he stands in a dirty puddle within “the public common” not only to claim transcendence of ego as transparent eyeball, but to figuratively clear the Western canon and so make way for his own assumptive imitative practices from other literary traditions. The Bhabhaian third space between Persian and American verse thus gets subsumed in the transparency. Attempting to render the ego invisible in turn represses literary precedence, seeing as how according to Emerson, in America the poet himself is to become the poem. Insofar as “man is only half himself, the other half is his expression” (*CW* 3:4), Emerson effectively establishes a priori the means by which to interject his own appropriative practice into a seemingly original self-expression. In a poem like “Bacchus,” for example, which Buell considers his finest, Emerson effectively imitates Hafez, rewriting the original that he read in German, to make it his own. That it becomes impossible to fully explicate what Emerson takes from Hafez as opposed to the German intermediary rendering supports, as if by default, a Bloomian reading of the American sublime. Emerson follows both Goethe and Hafez in calling for a wine that is more than mere wine to reach a more insightful vision.²⁸

Yet Emerson’s more officially translated poem out of which this poem emerged²⁹ (the original of which Von Hammer, the editor of the German version, cited as one of the verses that possibly earned Hafez the title of “Tongue of the Secret”) references “Jamschid’s glass.”³⁰ This too could be considered a mere carryover from the German version, were it not for Emerson’s grander claim on its metaphorical import in his own poem. Paradoxically, the art of literary translation often follows Emerson’s attempt at transcendence, attempting to move beyond mere literal naming to better capture the spirit of the source. Considered a locus of all-knowing power held by various kings in Persian mythology, the cup of Jamshid is said to

reflect the whole world and reveal the seven heavens of the universe. A frequent trope in the poetry of Hafez—one of the many rhetorical reasons that the Persian poet comes to claim the tongue of the unseen—its vehicular power carries Emerson’s “Bacchus” to the throne of an atemporal place where the American makes claims on an ancient future yet to materialize: “Kings unborn shall walk with me . . .” (CW 9:233). The wine itself in Emerson’s translation changes the lowly “Saki” or “wine boy” in the Persian court to a Western “Butler,” thereby changing the very means of delivery of the all-encompassing metaphor of wine. Emerson’s own history, which will get written as if for the first time, in turn links the eternity of humanity to the seven heavenly sisters of Western antiquity. The essence of Western Romantic free expression through Goethe, whose translations and adaptations from German Emerson read, surface in the same intersecting circle of influence with Emerson’s own circle of latently appropriated vision. Categorizing the ecstasy-producing power of wine—which plays on a central trope of classical Persian verse under the title of the Greek god “Bacchus” in the title—follows Bloom’s aforementioned Western shift in the theorizing of influence itself under Greek names. The speaker’s appeal to the “remembering wine” ultimately comes down to reviving his “dazzling memory” so that he can, as he states:

write my old adventures with the pen
Which on the first day drew
Upon the tablets blue,
The dancing Pleiads and eternal men. (CW 9:234)

The Western universe of antiquity concludes the poem like the end of an elegy, which for Emerson becomes a beginning before the beginning in the concluding reversion to an empty blue sky, a *tabula rasa* as clear as the first day of Genesis. Ultimately, a commingling Persian influence from a source poem by Hafez transforms into Emerson’s own successful poem, at least in part through his appropriative misplacement of Greek mythology.

It is no small feat that upon his deeper discovery of Persian verse Emerson continued to translate as well as appropriate a tradition of which he had little knowledge beyond the intermediary German texts from which he worked. Though beyond the scope of this chapter, it warrants emphasizing that to get to Hafez, Sa’di, and others, he also goes through the daunting influence of Goethe, a fellow Romantic writer who had responded to the Persian tradition before him. Emerson thus subverts an even more pressing German influence through his assumption of a more distant, though incredibly substantial, classical Persian tradition. The real “turn” in Emerson’s studies around the Bhabhaian third space (which metaphorically can

be seen in relation to Bloom as the transparent eyeball) can also be seen as occurring most profoundly, albeit still rather latently, at this intersecting point. Contrary to the common assumption that Ezra Pound was the founder, if not the discoverer, of using Eastern traditions in American poetic practices, and thereby effectively establishing what we have come to consider modern poetry, Emerson arrives as a significant, though relatively invisible, appropriative American progenitor. Steven Yao perhaps prematurely credits Pound with an unprecedented change in the history of literary translation, wherein, he explains, the modernist poet-translator “obviated intimate knowledge of the source language as a precondition for translation by demonstrating in an irrefutable way that successful . . . results could be attained without thorough . . . understanding of the original language of the text one translated.”³¹ Emerson can instead be seen here as protomodernist in an importantly new way, and with all the Bloomian implications, insofar as he subsumes the foreign letter to make original claims on the spirit. In so doing, he acts as harbinger to Pound’s comparable claim that all literature is contemporaneous. Emerson thereby provides a foundational rhetorical model for many writers to follow, instructing how to write over the masters.

By effectively clearing the literary landscape to invite his own appropriative practices of Eastern sources, Emerson in turn lays the figurative groundwork to invite a return of the foreign into the American tradition, allowing anglophone Middle Eastern–American writers to claim their voices here in the same “third space” into which he has written himself. Having claimed a first priority predicated on transparency, however, Emerson marks the spot of ego-transcendence, so to speak. Much as the verse of Wallace Stevens moves around the transparent eyeball—sullyng the preceding American romantic tradition established by his forefather through an indelible textual presence in poems like “Sailing after Lunch,” wherein the speaker positions himself as “a pupil of the gorgeous wheel”—hybrid writers must come through Emerson, though with the added burden of reconciling a much deeper tradition from one of their two originating countries. Paradoxically, they attempt to replicate the transparent eyeball by outlining or writing over Emerson’s example.

The Book of Khalid, the first Arab American novel by Lebanese American writer Ameen Rihani, who came to America with the poet Khalil Gibran, effectively demonstrates such a return upon Emerson’s origins. Walter Duncavent has shown how Rihani mined Emerson in his story of a young, idealistic immigrant who came to New York City in the early twentieth century with Shakib, his poet friend, by pointing out such themes as “primacy of intuition,” “a mixture of the mystical and the practical,” and the “individual rejection . . . of the social order.”³² Of further importance in the

novel, the protagonist, Khalid, consistently inserts an Emersonian will to a first priority within the “sepulchers of the fathers” from the old country. Haunted by the metaphorical presence of the invisible eyeball of the American counter-sublime and all its implications on history as well as the Romantic ego, Khalid finds the cleared space both inviting as well as threatening to his origins. As he explains, America “makes foreigners forget their native land.”³³ To this end, and very much in the spirit of following Emerson’s displacing the “sepulchres of the fathers,” Khalid acquires the habit of burning existing books after he reads them, as if cremating the very tradition he attempts to absorb. Emerson’s brazen appropriative imitations and translations in English of ghazals by Hafez from an original source text in a language he could not even read seem inversely to drive the protagonist poet Khalid to write over, in English, the famous Arabic couplets of the classical Iraqi poet al-Mutannabi by making a Whitmanesque catalogue of all the modern American inventions (as if combining Emerson with Franklin) in imitative lines like: “O Phonograph, thou wonder of our time, / Thy tongue of wax can sink like me in rhyme” (126) and “Electricity and Steam and Compressed Air / Will carry us to heaven yet, I swear” (127). It is as though Emerson anticipated Rihani’s imitation not just of himself, but his own imitation of predecessors from the Middle East.

What makes Khalid arguably most like Emerson, however, ironically involves his inability to sustain comparable self-reliant claims in New York, a failure that ultimately motivates him to transplant his American influence back in his country of origin. The all-encompassing, invisible claim on the New World makes it difficult to reconcile, especially when coming from the old one. Like other hybrid Middle Eastern–American writers who follow later in the twentieth century, Rihani reconfigures the intersecting “third space” back to his foreign origins as if to invert Emerson’s latent subsuming of the old into the new by overtly positioning Emerson onto the established tradition of his home country. Rihani’s protagonist, for example, rebels against the authoritative father of his beloved in Syria, leaving the patriarchal establishment of his own home to sleep in the tomb of Zeus (26), as if obviating mythical hierarchy in the way that Emerson equates himself with ancient kings of Persia through the possession of Jamshid’s cup in the aforementioned appropriation of Hafez. Upon returning to his native origins, which means a direct confrontation with the old mores and tradition from which he originally fled in America, Khalid finds a more viable authority to challenge when relatively free from Emerson as predecessor. While in America he had a dream of becoming a donkey boy in his home country, his voice in his poem recording it remains silenced by a goblin—in contradistinction to Whitman, who, the narrator mentions, “would have wrung his

neck, after he had ridden upon it.” (51). While Emerson has created seemingly inexhaustible space across which Whitman can run his infinitely expanding lines, Khalid finds America and its verse haunted by the anxiety of a presence he cannot repress or subvert via comparable sublime power.

Such a reading barely begins to expose the way hybrid Middle Eastern–American writers see their way back to their origins through a kind of third space that exposes Emerson’s vision in a foreign context. Just as the influence of the American predecessor surfaces throughout Rihani’s novel, so too does it inform other transnational texts. As if in response to Emerson’s appropriation of the Persian ghazal, for example, the Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali would reintroduce the form to countless American poets in English through his own intertextual modeling (that also must look back to older origins to reconcile the especially pervasive Emersonian influence of the American sublime). Continued study of influence in this new direction appears warranted, especially as it helps to better explain how hybrid writers in the United States must, like their American-born counterparts, come through Emerson, though with the added weight of a substantial ancient tradition behind them. Rather than seeing them as mere outsiders responding to an all-encompassing influence, exposing the seemingly invisible first priority of Emerson’s vision reveals that a comparable foreign presence has preceded them in the emerging field of American letters. They do not so much as immigrate as return the spirit of their own literary predecessors.

Notes

1. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 98–103. Subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

2. Willis Barnstone, *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 23.

3. Thus far much has been done to establish a comparative relation between Emerson and the Persian verse tradition. J. D. Yohannan’s investigation first made an exhaustive tracking of specific poems by the fourteenth-century classical Persian poet Hafez that Emerson translated through German renderings from Joseph von Hammer Purgstall (J. D. Yohannan, “Emerson’s Translations of Persian Poetry from German Sources,” *American Literature* 14 [January 1943]: 407–20), which was soon followed by his attempt to account for the influence of Persian poetry on Emerson in three predominant ways: an actual relation to a specific Persian source, a similarity between Emerson’s translation as well as imitation of the German intermediary rendering, and a conceptualization of an ideal poet whom Emerson names after the classical Persian poet, Sa’adi. Understandably, he claims to have left out an examination of the “less tangible effect of Persian poetry on Emerson’s

philosophy,” noting how difficult it proves to ascertain. J. D. Yohannan, “The Influence of Persian Poetry upon Emerson’s Work,” *American Literature* 15 (March 1943): 25.

4. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 52–56. Subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

5. However, the political situation found in the early internationalist interventions of the United States beyond Emerson’s New England begins to create other third spaces among marginalized people, true to Bhabha’s definition, who continue to encounter various colonist interventions beyond Emerson’s New England.

6. Paul Kane cites Emerson’s mention of Hafez in “History” (1841) and also notes that Emerson first acquired a German translation of the Persian poet in 1846. Paul Kane, “Emerson and Hafiz: The Figure of the Religious Poet,” *Religion and Literature* 41 (Spring 2009): 113–14. Subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text by page number. Frederic Ives Carpenter cites Emerson’s first introduction to the reading of Persian poets as 1841, while concluding that his reading of Asian literatures began to “bear fruit,” meaning to influence his thinking, as early as 1845. Carpenter, *Emerson and Asia* (1930; rpt., New York: Haskell House, 1968), 161, 13.

7. Lawrence Buell, *Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 151.

8. Robert Bly and Leonard Lewisohn, trans., *The Angels Knocking on the Tavern Door: Thirty Poems of Hafiz* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

9. “For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure” (Kane, “Emerson and Hafiz,” 123).

10. Significantly, Kane notes in his comparison with Emerson that, for Hafez, the most important theme is challenging hypocrisy (121).

11. As cited in Emerson’s journals. See “Notebook Orientalist,” in *The Topical Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph H. Orth et al., 3 vols. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990–94): 2:119.

12. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Collected Poems and Translations*, ed. Harold Bloom and Paul Kane (New York: Library of America, 1994), 258.

13. See, for example, Eric Wilson’s reading of biblical influence on Emerson’s passage in *Emerson’s Sublime Science* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1999).

14. James M. Cox, “R. W. Emerson: The Circles of the Eye,” in David Levin, ed., *Emerson: Prophecy, Metamorphosis, and Influence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 78.

15. Aryanpur Kashani, *Odes of Hafiz*, trans. Abbas Aryanpur Kashani (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1984), 7.

16. Florence Lederer, *The Secret Rose Garden of Sa’d ud din Mahmud Shabistari*, trans. Florence Lederer (London: John Murray, 1920), 15, 29.

17. Syed Mumtaz Ali, “Sama (Mystical Music).” Canadian Society of Muslims, <http://muslimcanada.org>.

18. Ghazal 68, translated by the author.

19. Donald E. Pease, “Emerson, Nature, and the Sovereignty of Influence,” *boundary 2* 8, no. 3 (1980): 59.
20. Dick Davis, “On Not Translating Hafez,” *New England Review* 25, nos. 1–2 (2004): 310–18; 315.
21. Hafez, *The Divan of Hafez, Written in the Fourteenth Century*, by Khwaja Shamsu-d-Di Muhammad-i-Hafiz-i-Shirazi, *Otherwise Known as Lis anu-I Ghaib and Tarjum anu-I-Asrar*, trans. H. Wilberforce Clarke (Calcutta: Government of India Central Printing Office, 1891), 82. Compiled and corrected by Behrouz Houmayoun Far at http://www.enel.ucalgary.ca/People/far/hobbies/iran/Gazal/hafez_ghazal_bi_p1.pdf.
22. For a good comparative discussion of the association of wine between Eastern and Western cultures, see Mahmood Karimi-Hakak and Bill Wolak, ed. and trans., introduction to *Your Lover’s Beloved: 51 Ghazals by Hafez* (New York: Cross-Cultural Communications, 2009), 26–37.
23. Yohannan, “Influence,” 28.
24. Carpenter, *Emerson and Asia*, 36–37.
25. Kenneth Burke, “I, Eye, Ay—Emerson’s Early Essay on ‘Nature’: Thoughts on the Machinery of Transcendence,” *Sewanee Review* 74 (1966): 875–95.
26. Ricardo Miguel-Alfonso, “The Influence of Anxiety; or, the Postmodernity of Emerson,” in José Ramón Prado-Pérez and Dídac Llorens-Cubedo, eds., *New Literatures of Old: Dialogues of Tradition and Innovation in Anglophone Literature* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 55.
27. Pease, “Emerson, Nature, and the Sovereignty of Influence,” 67.
28. Buell, *Emerson*, 152.
29. As cited by Emerson in his rather loose translation of a related poem from Hafez, which Buell considers relatively close in correspondence (Buell, *Emerson*, 152–53).
30. As cited in note to translation in Emerson, *Collected Poems and Translations*, 104–5.
31. Steven Yao, *Translation and the Languages of Modernism* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 26.
32. Walter E. Dunnavent, “Rihani, Emerson, and Thoreau,” in Nathan Funk and Betty Sitka, eds., *Ameen Rihani: Bridging East and West; A Pioneering Call for Arab-American Understanding* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004), 56.
33. Ameen Fares Rihani, *The Book of Khalid* (1911; rpt., New York: Melville House, 2011), 118. Subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text by page number.