

Mehdi Aminrazavi (ed.)

Sufism and American Literary Masters. SUNY Series in Islam. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2014. xiii + 297 pages, glossary, bibliography, list of contributors, index. Cloth. ISBN 978-1-4384-5353-8. US \$85.00.

Scholarship on western literary engagement with the Islamic tradition is not entirely novel but it is still narrowly focused on a few figures or tangential to larger research trajectories. Key figures of investigation in previous scholarship have been Hafiz and Rumi, including preliminary work by Franklin D. Lewis, *Rumi, Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teachings, and Poetry of Jalâl al-Din Rumi* (Oneworld, 2007), and more broadly in J. R. LeMaster, Sabahat Jahan, *Walt Whitman and the Persian Poets: A Study in Literature and Religion* (Ibex Publishers, 2007). These types of works exemplify the contiguous nature of previous scholarship to primary fields—folks working in literary studies come across source anomalies, such as Hafiz, and pursue it in relation to their own research pursuits (e.g. LeMaster is a literary scholar of Walt Whitman), or those working in Islamic traditions follow the documental trail of their Muslim subjects to the furthest degree (e.g. Lewis is one of the scholarly masters of Rumi). The consequences of these research patterns is that it is difficult for the novice to get a clear picture of how Islam has been understood and imagined by western authors. The few scholars who concentrate on Islam in Western literature have focused primarily on the pre-Emerson period, most notably the work of Jeffrey Einboden, *Islam and Romanticism: Muslim Currents from Goethe to Emerson* (Oneworld, 2014), and more recently in *The Islamic Lineage of American Literary Culture: Muslim Sources from the Revolution to Reconstruction* (Oxford University Press, 2016). Therefore, the thematic privileging of Sufism and the limited domain of American literature make Aminrazavi's volume unique and significant because of the dearth of concentrated studies on this topic at this time.

Aminrazavi's introduction provides a skeletal history of the reception of "Oriental" wisdom in Euro-American contexts. Translations of Persian poetry in European languages were already being produced by non-Muslims in the late sixteenth century. By 1790 there were English translations of many Persian classics, including Sa'di's *Gulistan*, Hafiz's *Divan*, Omar Khayyam's *Ruba'iyat*, and Firdawsi's *Shah Nameh*. In the nineteenth century Persian poetry provided literary resources for American writers, sometimes simply for "Eastern" aesthetics but often in terms of philosophical sentiments. Aminrazavi conjectures that this growing interest in Persian poetry by nineteenth and early-twentieth century authors may be due to the collective trauma in a post Civil War American society. Of course, Sufi writings were only part of the corpus

of spiritual literature of the “East” that American intellectuals were exploring. The short introduction concludes with an outline of the trajectory of the remaining chapters.

The collection is organized around the role of Sufism in three biographical orbits—“The Master” (Ralph Waldo Emerson), “The Disciple” (Walt Whitman), and “The Initiates” (Mark Twain, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, Thomas Lake Harris, Lawrence Oliphant, and Paschal Beverly Randolph). The opening chapter establishes thematic patterns that run throughout the volume while exploring a variety of American authors. Leonard Lewisohn provides key subjects that are intersecting in both Persian Sufi poetry and Romantic sources, such as eternal time, annihilation, mystical death, imaginal realms, and the unity of religions.

Chapters 2–5 revolve around the character of Emerson and analyze his appreciation for Persian mysticism and poetry from both a broad perspective of American literary life down to the intimate details of his personal history. Mansur Ekhtiyar begins this comprehensive section by sequentially documenting the finer tasks and engagements of his life in relation to Persian literature. Already by college, at the age of 17, Emerson was intrigued by the “mysterious East” and the chronology unveils the development of his rich cosmopolitan intellectual grounding. Marwan Obeidat argues that we should understand Emerson as a figure who was thoroughly enamored with the Orient but who willfully remained Occidental. He wanted to reap Sufi philosophical principles from the Muslim Orient but translate them into a familiar American literary vocabulary. Parvin Loloi outlines the continuities between European and American literary venues that would provide the entry point for Emerson’s appreciation for the poet Sa’di. The chapter also provides close readings of several of Emerson’s writing inspired by the Persian poet. Farhang Jahanpour does a close reading of Emerson’s work in relation to Persian sources to see the corollaries and patterns. Overall, the chapters work well together to paint portraits of Emerson from close-up, a distance, situated within the American literary landscape, and in embrace with his Persian beloveds.

The second shorter section, chapters 6–7, focuses on Walt Whitman, who has a more tenuous relationship with the Sufi literary tradition. Mahnaz Ahmad outlines the keys features of Hafiz’s work, notions of the oneness of creation and self-realization of the divine, that are important themes in Whitman’s writings. Most evidence of the influence is established through thematic resonance rather than direct citational practices. Whitman’s most direct link is his short poem “A Persian Lesson” (originally called “A Sufi Lesson”), which divulges the wisdom of a “Greybeard Sufi.” Massud Farzan extends this investigation