

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

August 30, 2016

Hamid Dabashi, *Persophilia: Persian Culture on the Global Scene*, Harvard University Press, 2015, 250 pp., \$35.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9780674504691.

Persophilia is the most recent monograph by the prolific scholar, Hamid Dabashi, Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. As the book's title suggests, it concerns a fascination with Persia that Dabashi traces back to the ancient Greeks and follows through its manifestations in Western philosophy, literature, painting, and music. But this coinage does not refer exclusively to favorable images of Persia and Persians. In fact, *Persophilia*, as articulated by Dabashi, covers a gamut that runs from fascination to phobia. The intertwining of curiosity and fear is evident in the earliest iterations of *Persophilia*: "For the Greeks, the Persians were their grand imperial nemesis, as they were later for the Romans; and when Europeans turned to their Bible, the selfsame Persia was there in their holiest of texts—in Ezra, in Esther, and many other places" (15). There is yet another dimension to Dabashi's conceptualization of *Persophilia*: the Persians' own role in shaping both the image of Persia and the manner in which it encountered the West. This facet of the study is echoed in the book's epigraph by the eighteenth-century French traveler Chardin: "Persia is the greatest Empire in the world, if you consider it according to the Geographical Description given by the Persians." What distinguishes Dabashi's work from prior studies of the reception of Persia in the West is its engagement with movements of ideas across and between Persia/Iran and the West.

Not unlike *Orientalism*, *Persophilia* refers to constructs of Persia that facilitated self-definition, be it of the ancient Greeks, Europeans, and Americans. One might say, *Orientalism* is the backdrop against which Dabashi situates *Persophilia*. As he points out in his Introduction, Raymond Schwab's *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Discovery of India and the East: 1680-1880* (originally published in French in 1950) and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) are precursors and points of departure for his study. Acknowledging Schwab's formative analysis of the role of the Orient in the emergence of nineteenth-century European Romanticism and Said's scholarly contribution to understanding the relationship between power and knowledge production about the Orient, Dabashi views Schwab's concerns as primarily cultural and Said's as political. He then positions his own focus on the social domain, which he sees as having been left untouched by Schwab and Said. To explore the social ramifications of *Persophilia*, Dabashi draws on Jürgen Habermas's concept of the bourgeois public sphere, as outlined in his 1962 *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. What Habermas allows Dabashi to do is to "trace the origin and disposition of *Persophilia* in its immediate European context and to focus on

its bourgeois public sphere as it spread and became transnational in the course of history and by virtue of the European empires. That global scene both posits and animates a transnational public sphere beyond its European pedigree, with far-reaching political consequences” (2-3). Persophilia, in other words, both shaped the European bourgeois public sphere and mobilized a public space in Persia/Iran that served as a site of self-articulation, emancipation for the poets and literati from the “historical tyranny of their entrapment in the royal court” (16), and ultimately became “the undoing of ‘the West’” (235).

The choice of Habermas’s notion of public sphere is not unproblematic, and Dabashi acknowledges the gender and class bias of a theorization rooted in particular European social, economic, and political conditions, but he maintains that “on the colonial site the inner contradictions of the bourgeois public sphere more readily burst into the open and result either in the formation of parapublic spheres underground or in the exilic communities or lead directly to revolutionary uprisings” (228). Yet, the misalignment is evident in the need to deploy the term “parapublic,” which appears to be anything but public. Dabashi’s own frustration with the model remaining inapplicable in contemporary Iran would seem to suggest that not all forms of traffic of ideas between Iran and the West necessarily lead to emancipatory consequences. The Iranian revolution of 1979, whose political outcomes Dabashi justifiably decries, also point to the need for theoretical modifications. Nevertheless, this does not detract from Dabashi’s crucial contribution to a richer understanding of the global movements of ideas in which Persia/Iran has long participated.

Divided into twelve chapters, *Persophilia* has a remarkably vast scope. It moves from the world of classical antiquity and the Bible to eighteenth-century France, the East-India Company, German Idealism, European Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Nihilism, to the nineteenth and twentieth-century British and French cultural archives. The apparent chronological division of the chapters does not follow a rigid pattern, especially as the chapters reveal contrapuntal movements from the presumed European center to Iran and back. For instance, illustrating the particular ways in which an imagined and imaginative Persia became the catalyst for new forms of political governance in eighteenth-century France, Dabashi reminds us that Montesquieu’s focus in his epistolary novel, *Persian Letters*, was not Persia, but rather France. Turning to reflections of Montesquieu’s works in the writings of the nineteenth-century Iranian intellectual and literary critic, Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzadeh, Dabashi illustrates their reconfiguration in the formation of a modern Iranian nation. In the work of Sir William Jones, a philologist and officer of the British East India Company, Dabashi locates the roots of Orientalist philology and a system of linguistic classification that identified Persian as an Indo-European language and subsequently facilitated the birth of linguistic nationalism in Iran. The chapter on James Morier’s novel *Hajji Baba of Ispahan* and its Persian translation, as well as the analysis of the work of the British Orientalist Edward Browne, are among the most insightful and enriching analyses Dabashi offers.

The chapters of *Persophilia* are replete with fascinating examples of transcultural movements, although some are not as compellingly argued as others. The chapter devoted to Goethe, Hegel, and Hafez is one that stands out for its sweeping and surprising turns. Dabashi identifies Goethe’s *West-Östlicher Divan* as an example of “romantic obsession with annihilation” (91), mistakenly conflates it with Goethe’s earlier work belonging to the short-lived *Sturm und Drang* movement, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and lumps them together under romanticism. Dabashi can hardly be expected to have mastery of Goethe scholarship

or German literary history, but he is accountable for the conclusions he reaches: “this confluence of European romanticism and Persian poetic mysticism and their joint proclivity toward political absolutism will have a historical rendezvous in the establishment of the Islamic Republic and its innate totalitarian proclivities” (100). Even more startlingly, he proceeds to single out the Iranian scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “perhaps the most notoriously retrogressive thinker of twentieth-century Iran” (101), and holds him accountable for the “totalitarian tendencies” of the Islamic Republic. Such leaps of logic and ad hominem asides are baffling and out of place in an otherwise capacious work of scholarship. Or does the choleric rhetoric stem from the fact that Persophilia does not always result in the outcomes Dabashi favors: “the European romancing of Persia dissolved the colonial divide and thus perforce the postcolonial frontier fictions and allowed for an expansive, transgressive, overarching subjectivity to emerge” (234)?

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Citation Information

Rahimieh, Nasrin, Review of *Persophilia: Persian Culture on the Global Scene*, *SCTIW Review*, August 30, 2016. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1198>.

ISSN: 2374-9288