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Ahmad Shamlu, *Born Upon the Dark Spear: Selected Poems of Ahmad Shamlu*, trans. Jason Bahbak Mohaghegh, Contra Mundum Press, 2015, 141 pp., \$18.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9781940625164.

Recent debates on World Literature have challenged scholars, particularly those working in non-European languages, to rethink our once entrenched positions within national contexts and to reinvent literary studies according to a global paradigm. A new translation of Iranian poet Ahmad Shamlu (1925-2000) gives occasion to reflect on modern Persian poetry's place within the changing fields of area and literary studies. For its champions like David Damrosch and the Institute for World Literature at Harvard that he directs, World Literature posits a globalized marketplace wherein texts are exchanged between languages and cultures via the common currency of translation. Recuperating Goethe's conception of *Weltliteratur*, Damrosch argues that a work becomes world literature "whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture."¹ Accordingly, it is the translator's negotiations and brokerages, more than a work's intrinsic value, that determine how successfully a text will circulate in world systems. Or, to put it differently, the translator's work only survives the passage from native culture to global canon if the receiving culture sees value in the translated work. Of course, some translators may wish to document a work's curious value within some foreign system. However, such a translation, insofar as it does not enrich the consuming language, necessarily remains a cultural artifact, an object for ethnographic cataloguing as opposed to a Great Work that serves the highest humanist endeavors.

In terms of specific texts, the Old Testament provides World Literature with its gold standard. At this stage in history, one can likely find a work in nearly any language that somewhere draws from Biblical themes, alludes to Old Testament narratives, or otherwise appropriates language that the reader will recognize as "Biblical," though neither the reader nor writer in question necessarily possesses any knowledge of ancient Near Eastern languages or cultures. It is the Bible in its multitudinous translations, and not the "original" (admittedly a highly fraught concept), which, more than any other text, has provided writers with the greatest wealth of raw materials for their craft; it is the Old Testament as World Literature, not as the book of a single people, that backs an emergent world-orientation in literary studies.

¹ David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 4.

Unlike the transtemporal, supranational Bible, modern Persian poetry has been largely excluded from the World Literature canon.² That is not to say that Persian poets have failed to produce works of the highest aesthetic caliber. On the contrary, any claim to a universal theory of poetic modernity would do well to consider Forugh Farrokhzad's (1935-1967) imagery, Mehdi Akhavan-Sales's (1929-1990) diction, or Simin Behbahani's (1927-2014) lyricism to start. But what the modern Persian poets do lack, by and large, is a readership beyond their native culture or national context. And this absence from the world literary scene contrasts even with the relative visibility of certain classical Persian poets. To wit, in a recent interview, American spoken word artist Saul Williams cites Rumi as the inspiration for "Burundi," a poem composed in Paris with references to China, Congo, and Ramallah.³ Or, in their monumental guide to poetic metaphor, Lakoff and Turner twice cite Fitzgerald's translations of Omar Khayyam to demonstrate recurrent tropes in English literature.⁴ Persianists will be quick to remind us that the popular versions of Rumi and Khayyam in English bear little resemblance to the medieval Persian originals. And postcolonial scholars have certainly taken Edward Fitzgerald to task for his Anglo-aristocratic derision towards the Orient and its peoples.⁵ Nonetheless, the admittedly problematic English translations have provided Williams as poet and Lakoff and Turner as theoretical linguists with autonomous texts that inform and enliven their art and theory, respectively. In other words, the translated Rumi and Khayyam experience meaningful afterlives in systems and contexts far beyond their cultural-linguistic origins. And it is this afterlife that no modern or contemporary Persian poet, to my knowledge, has yet attained.

Translations of the major modern Persian poets do exist in English, some appearing in anthologies and a few even in stand-alone collections. However, most of these translations are produced by scholars (like myself) with training in area studies. While training in Iranian or Middle Eastern Studies presumably qualifies one to convey meanings accurately and to contextualize poems within the region's social history, it rarely extends to the craft of English poetry, which falls more in the domain of MFA programs than in Title VI centers. It should therefore come as little surprise if these translations, assuming they leave academe at all, speak more to readers who want insight into the region than they do to poets and artists seeking inspiration for their own work. And even the few non-academic translators working on modern Persian still tend, at best, to frame their translations within a geographic context or, at worst, to cater to base preconceptions about the Islamic World. In the case of the latter, take the example of the award-winning collection *Sin: Selected Poems of Forugh Farrokhzad*.⁶ Although the translator bills herself "a poet in her own right," she nonetheless takes her collection's title from a poem published early in Farrokhzad's career, a period when, in the poet's own words, she still "had not found [her] own language, [her] own form

² In common usage, the "modern" period of Persian poetry begins in the 1920s with the "new poetry" of Nima Yushij and continues to the present day.

³ Saul Williams and Amy Goodman, "Spoken Word Artist Saul Williams Extended Interview on His New Album, 'MartyrLoserKing,'" *Democracy Now*, April 22, 2016, <http://www.democracynow.org/2016/4/22/video_spoken_word_artist_saul_williams>, (accessed April 28, 2016).

⁴ George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 11, 19.

⁵ E.g., Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 58-59.

⁶ Forugh Farrokhzad, *Sin: Selected Poems of Forugh Farrokhzad*, translated by Sholeh Wolpé (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2007).

and intellectual world.”⁷ The translator may well consider herself a poet, but the framework that she presents to Anglophone audiences clearly emphasizes aspects of Farrokhzad’s legacy that have little to do with her poetic achievements. And in case any question remains as to what sort of image she wishes to project, the translator’s foreword begins by recalling how a fellow Iranian referred to the late Farrokhzad as “that whore.”⁸ Despite the collection’s mostly competent translations, the first image we receive is that of Farrokhzad as a sexual rebel in a society that oppresses its women. Readers will be forgiven if they miss the fact that it is not in “Sin” but rather in *Another Birth* (*Tavallodi Digar*, 1963), a collection published seven years later, that the poet reached the pinnacle of her artistic genius or that *Another Birth*’s eponymous poem marks one of the twentieth century’s most refined *ars poeticas* in any language.⁹ Indeed, to read the Farrokhzad of *Sin* into a global canon of modernist poets would be to read against the grain of acutely Iranian socio-sexual transgressions that the translator chooses to highlight.

Of all the modern Persian poets, however, none lays claim to a spot in World Literature’s canon more readily than Ahmad Shamlu. Shamlu was a highly celebrated figure in his own lifetime with over a dozen original poetry collections and a Nobel Prize nomination to his name. To this day, many Iranians, especially those with secular or anti-establishment inclinations, remember the poet as a national hero who devoted his life’s work to the struggle for social justice and human rights at home. But his legacy also includes his many and meaningful engagements with aesthetic and intellectual movements beyond his national borders. A prolific (though far from scholarly) translator, Shamlu’s renditions helped popularize poets like Langston Hughes, Garcia Lorca, and Paul Eluard among Persophone audiences. And though he paid particular attention to contemporary writers in Europe and the Americas, Shamlu’s broader artistic vision is reflected in his translations of non-Western and pre-modern literatures, the Biblical Song of Songs among them, and in his promotion of non-literary art forms, Western classical music perhaps the most notable example. In fact, Shamlu recorded several albums of poetry recitations set to classical music that still circulate widely today. In terms of both his global outlook and his status as a cultural icon, then, Shamlu best belongs in the company of other twentieth century giants like Neruda, Mayakofsky, and Nazim Hikmet. And like his better-recognized peers, Shamlu should be remembered as a larger-than-life public figure whose poetics and politics addressed the concerns of a particular nation while at the same declaring the world at large his rightful home.

In light of Shamlu’s globally-oriented artistic vision on the one hand and a general interest in “worlding” literary studies, at least in some North American institutions, on the other, Jason Bahbak Mohaghegh’s new translation, *Born Upon the Dark Spear: Selected Poems of Ahmad Shamlu*, makes a timely addition to the modern Persian poetry currently available in English translation. Mohaghegh’s seventy-eight selected poems include examples from all six decades of Shamlu’s illustrious career, leaving English readers with the most comprehensive view of the poet’s work to date. But apart from the sheer volume of poems collected

⁷ From Farrokhzad’s interview with the poet M. Azad. Forugh Farrokhzad, *Another Birth and Other Poems*, translated by Hasan Javadi and Susan Sallée (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2010), 196-197.

⁸ Farrokhzad, *Sin*, xi.

⁹ M.R. Ghanoonparvar documents sixteen translations of “Another Birth” published in English alone. Of them all, I would argue (as does he) that Ghanoonparvar’s own translation best conveys the force of Farrokhzad’s poetic imagery and the genius of her artistic vision. “Alien Rebirths of ‘Another Birth’” in *Forugh Farrokhzad, Poet of Modern Iran: Iconic Woman and Feminine Pioneer of New Persian Poetry*, edited by Dominic Parviz Brookshaw and Nasrin Rahimieh (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 165-178.

together for the first time, *Born Upon the Dark Spear* also marks a significant departure from previous translations in the way that Mohaghegh attempts to write the poet as a universal voice, a figure who speaks neither for modern Iran as a socio-political entity nor for Persian literature as a self-contained cosmos, but rather as an artist speaking to and for *humanity* in the word's most idealistic sense.

Setting the tone for the translations that follow, Mohaghegh's foreword disavows the particularities of Shamlu's life and thought. Instead, we are presented with Shamlu the "brutal humanist," a poet of "interminable warfare" whose words "shav(e) away at the boundary of the known and unknown" (ii). Indeed, readers who wish to understand where the poet fits into Persian literary or Iranian political history will do better to look elsewhere. The Shamlu who emerges from *Born Upon the Dark Spear* is a poet whose faith lies in a universal conception of art as the only hope for human redemption:

Art is testimony that descends from sincerity:
a light that translates the catastrophe
so that mankind
might recollect its tainted integrity.

("Interpreter of Catastrophe," 122)

Shamlu's poetry makes innumerable references to specific movements, events, and individuals within Iran, but Mohaghegh's selections draw us toward such moments when the poet seems to believe quite sincerely that his work addresses our collective, existential woes, beyond any confines of space or time.

More than any specific feat of poetic inventiveness, it is Mohaghegh's emphasis on Shamlu as a poet who speaks in universal truths and the logical assumption that such universality merits entry into the canon of World Literature that might help the poet acquire meaningful afterlives in translation. Shamlu enthusiasts will find it heartening that Contra Mundum, the book's publisher, describes its mission as one of rendering increased visibility for "works of fundamental significance to *Weltliteratur* (& *Weltkultur*) that still remain in relative oblivion, works that alter and disrupt standard circuits of thought." With *Born Upon the Dark Spear*, Shamlu joins the good company of other cosmopolitan writers like Fernando Pessoa, William Wordsworth, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau who have also appeared in Contra Mundum titles. Although previous translations of Shamlu by Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak or the late Leonardo Alishan remain difficult to surpass in terms of scholarly accuracy and eloquence, those translations appeared either in anthologies of Persian, Iranian, or Middle Eastern literature that contextualized the poet within a national or regional framework or else in scholarly journals with limited readership. And along the same lines, Firoozeh Papan-Matin's *The Love Poems of Ahmad Shamlu* provides an excellent critical introduction to Shamlu's life and work and includes a fine selection of parallel Persian-English translations by Papan-Matin and Arthur E. Lane.¹⁰ Their translations often manage to convey the particularities of Shamlu's notion of love and the singular brilliance of the poetic language with which he expressed that concept. However, the book primarily addresses specialists within Middle Eastern Studies, the kind of readers who will appreciate that the poet's name is transliterated as *Aḥmad Shāmlu* or who will find the spelling of his contemporary's name as *Akhavān-Thālith* preferable to a more phonetic (and I daresay humane) rendering like

¹⁰ Ahmad Shamlu, *The Love Poems of Ahmad Shamlu*, translated by Firoozeh Papan-Matin and Arthur E. Lane (Bethesda, MD: Ibex, 2005).

Akhavan-Saless. Maybe more to the point, where Papan-Matin's selections center around the single concept of love, Mohaghegh aspires towards a broader depiction of the poet's thought and promises to deliver "a synchronous yet diverse series of philosophical concepts and stylistic forms" (140).

As Mohaghegh rightly suggests, the philosophical concepts developed in Shamlu's poetry are varied and profuse. Nonetheless, one concept that proves central within the poet's universe of thought is that of heroic self-sacrifice. Shamlu wrote moving tributes to social rebels and political martyrs throughout his career, but Mohaghegh aptly draws his selections' title from "The Chasm" (*Shekāf*), a lyrical masterpiece in the poet's distinctive elegiac mode (95). The Persian poem originally included an inscription reading, "on the execution of Khosrow Golesorkhi," though later editions would omit this dedication, a practice that Mohaghegh also follows throughout the book. Golesorkhi (1944-1974) was a poet and journalist who gained widespread fame for defending his Marxist-Leninist beliefs during a televised show-trial which resulted in his execution by firing squad in early 1974.¹¹ By dropping the inscription, however, Mohaghegh's translation, like the later Persian editions, invites the reader to reflect on broad notions of self-sacrifice, ideological conviction, subjectivity, agency, history, and so on instead of framing the poem as documentation of a single, historically-occurring individual's deeds. An Iranian critic has recently argued that the genius of the poem lies in its syntax, in large part in the way that the poem consists of almost no conjugated verbs.¹² Mohaghegh's translation also opens a window towards this particular instance of poetic brilliance, as in the opening lines:

To be born
upon a dark spear
like the open birth of a wound.

Though the poem refers to the act of giving one's life for a cause and at one time at least referred to a specific individual who did so, it makes such a reference via the infinitive form of a verb. On a grammatical level, the action to which the poem refers occurs outside of time, neither in the past nor the present but rather continuously and eternally, a perfect corollary for the regeneration that the poet sees as inherent to the act. To die for one's convictions is to step outside of historical time:

To navigate the unparalleled compendium of fortune
throughout
in chains.
To burn
on one's own flame
until the last ember,
on the flame of some veneration
uncovered

¹¹ See Maziar Behrooz, "Golsorki, Kosrow" in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/golsorki>>, (accessed September 15, 2016).

¹² Sayeh Eqtesadinia, *Ham She'r Ham Shā'er: Ta'amolli Dar Bāb-e She'r va Shā'erān-e Mo'āsser* [Both Poetry and Poet: Reflections on Modern Poetry and Poets], (Tehran: Nashr-e Markaz, 1394 [2015]), 79-86. My arguments on the importance of verb tense (or lack thereof) in "The Chasm" derive entirely from Eqtesadinia's insightful essay.

by slaves
in the dust of its path.

In fact, until the last stanza, “uncovered” (*yāfteb’and*) is the only conjugated verb in the Persian, the only verb that is defined by time. Thus it is the slaves, those of us who abide by the dictates imposed upon us, who commit temporal actions; we are bound not only by the despotic structures that shape our given societies but also to and by time itself. Those who choose “to bloom upon the thorn-bush of blood,” on the other hand, become eternal. Unfortunately, Mohaghegh interrupts the syntactic and therefore conceptual harmony when his translation implies that the Persian’s “to cross” (*gozashtan*) and “to reach” (*rāb rā boridan*) refer to completed actions:

and in this way superior
for having crossed the scourge-plane of contempt
and reached the extreme limit of hatred.—

Without parsing each of the translator’s lexical choices, I would propose here that a preliminary adjustment to “and in this way superior / for crossing the scourge-plane of contempt / and reaching the extreme limit of hatred.—” would better reflect the eternally recurring nature of the events that the poem celebrates; martyrs do not simply “cross” the scourge-plane but rather acquire an existence in which their crossing becomes eternal, without beginning or end.

Still, the translation recovers in the tightly-crafted closing lines to elucidate the chasm that exists between the complicit multitudes who choose self-preservation and those exceptional few who surrender their lives for their convictions:

Ah, of whom am I speaking?
We, the clueless to why we live
They, the conscious of why they die.

Where, as we know from the context, the poet first took inspiration from Golesorkhi, the third-person plural pronoun in the final line no longer allows us to read the entire poem in reference to a single individual, suggesting instead that the words pay tribute to an entire class of people, a heroic stock whose examples undoubtedly appear across cultures and epochs.

Ultimately, it will be the power of Shamlu’s language to inhabit two worlds at once—the temporally-bound realm of socio-political struggle, in his case late twentieth century Iranian, with the omnipresent universe of mythology, prophesy, and legend—that will, I imagine, resonate with future audiences. Mohaghegh has by no means produced a definitive English translation of the Iranian giant, nor does he purport to do so, but *Born Upon the Dark Spear* does offer the best hope yet for the poet to travel into foreign cultures. The book gives access to a peculiar feeling that politically-minded poets, at least when they have mastered their craft, often evoke, a feeling that the poetry speaks cryptically about people and events that we can never fully recover and yet the same language speaks from some form of collective lineage and conjures a sense of universal ideals.

In another of his elegiac masterpieces, Shamlu enlists the Prophet Abraham to pay tribute again to an executed political dissident who, like the aforementioned Golesorkhi, remains unnamed in Mohaghegh's translation.¹³ "Anthem of Abraham in Fire" does not explicitly retell any of the tradition of the founding prophet for the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths (82-84). In fact, the name Abraham appears nowhere in the body of the poem, which in one place likens its hero to Achilles and in another addresses him as Esfandiar, the tragic would-be king of Iranian legend. It is as if Shamlu tells us that we need *all legend, all mythology, all our collective origin-tales* to make sense of the struggles and sacrifices of the real men and women who live and die in our own times. The hero of "Anthem of Abraham in Fire" explains his final act of sacrifice in his own words:

“...I deserved a God of another kind,
 one worthy of a creation
 that does not
 arch
 its neck
 for the inevitable table-scrap.

And a God
 of another kind
 I created.” (84)

For Shamlu, it would seem, nothing speaks more directly to the magnificence of human beings than our ability to build anew, even at the cost of our own lives, not despite the weight of our own traditions but indeed from within the complexities and convictions that we derive from them. If World Literature promises a world where texts can rebuild themselves meaningfully, even profitably, in settings distant from their origins, then Shamlu's poetry and its latest translation, a testament to the poet's faith in reinvention and progress, brings such a world ever slightly closer within reach.

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¹³ Early Persian editions include the inscription “*e'dām-e mehdi rezā'i dar meydān-e chitgar*” [The execution of Mehdi Rezai in Chitgar Square]. Ahmad Shamlu, “*Sorud-e Ebrāhim dar Ātasb*” in *Majmu'eh-ye Āsār: Daftar-e Yekom: She'r* [Collected Works: Part One: Poetry], edited by Niyaz Ya'qubshahi (Tehran: Zamaneh, 1378 [1999]), 774.

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