Iranian Studies, 2021
Vol. 54, Nos. 5–6, 977–986

Review Essay

Emerson in Iran: The American Appropriation of Persian Poetry, Roger Sedarat, New York: SUNY Press, 2019, ISBN 978-1-4384-7485-4 (hbk), 218 pp.

I read Roger Sedarat's *Emerson in Iran: The American Appropriation of Persian Poetry* with curiosity and interest. I was familiar with some of the earlier studies of Ralph Waldo Emerson's engagement with classical Persian poetry, works such as J. D. Yohannan's "The Influence of Persian Poetry Upon Emerson's Work," "Emerson's Translations of Persian Poetry from German Sources," as well as the chapter in his *Persian Poetry in England and America*, Paul Kane's "Emerson and Hafiz: The Figure of the Religious Poet," and the essays by Mansur Ekhtiyar, Marwan M. Obeidat, Parvin Loloi, and Farhang Jahanpour in Mehdi Aminrazavi's critical edition, *Sufism and American Literary Masters*.[1] But I was not aware of any single book-length study of Emerson's appropriation of Persia's poetic traditions. In that sense, I found the scale of *Emerson in Iran* to be one of its notable features; the

[1]Yohannan, "The Influence of Persian Poetry"; "Emerson's Translations of Persian Poetry"; and *Persian Poetry in England and America*, 115–34; Kane, "Emerson and Hafiz"; Ekhtiyar, "The Chronological Development"; Obeidat, "Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Muslim Orient"; Loloi, "Emerson and Aspects of Saʿdi's Reception"; Jahanpour, "Emerson on Hafiz and Saʿdi." These studies complement more general surveys such as Gail's *Persia and the Victorians* and Javadi's *Persian Literary Influence on English Literature*.

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book's focus on the manifestations of Persian literary culture in Emerson's writing fills a gap in research on cultural exchange between Persia (Iran) and the West. There is also something particularly timely about Sedarat's book. Considering the tainted history of Iran–United States relations since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and the troubling surge of animosity between the two countries in recent years, *Emerson in Iran* is a well-timed attempt to draw attention to a significant, and largely unheeded, form of interaction between Iran and the United States; it is a work of scholarship that aims to unearth and re-examine a form of intellectual and cultural contact between the two nations that stands in stark contrast with their acrimonious political confrontations in recent decades.

Emerson in Iran is also distinctive for a number of other reasons. Unlike most studies of western treatments of classical Persian verse, in which the focus is primarily on the renditions and representations of Persian poetry, the emphasis in Sedarat's study is on the "rhetorical tendencies in Emerson's poetry and prose [that are] relative to his Persian sources" (p. 7). In other words, Sedarat's analysis of Emerson's Persian engagements occurs not through the traditional framework of line-by-line examinations of his translations, via German, of Persian (which is the case in Yohannan's essays, for instance), but through exploring the correspondences that he sees between Emerson's philosophy, and its mode of expression, and some of the spiritual tenets that are found in classical Persian poetry. This is an ingenious method of uncovering the impact of Emerson's Persian encounters: to look for the repercussions of his Persian readings not only in his poetry, where the influences are more discernible, but also in his prose, where the manifestations of Persia are less direct. Sedarat's method, admittedly, is not entirely original: Kane's attempt to "rely upon Emerson's prose for an understanding of his [translation of Persian] poetry" predates his by almost a decade.[2] Yet there is something novel, and indeed unconventional, about Sedarat's approach: Sedarat looks for these corresponding expressions retrospectively but also prospectively; he looks for them not only in writings that are known to have been informed and influenced by Emerson's Persian readings but also in an essay such as *Nature* (1836), which Emerson had written before his proper introduction to Persian poetry in the early 1840s. This anachronistic form of investigation is fundamental to what appears to be Sedarat's primary objective in *Emerson in Iran*: to portray Emerson as "*a priori* poet-translator," an image which remains indistinct and unconvincing in the end, however insistently it is stated (p. 153). Sedarat's central premise is that Emerson, in his conception of translation, which was rooted in, and in direct communication with, a Platonic perception of the world, was able to anticipate and transcend all national, temporal, cultural, and linguistic limitations. This mode of critical thinking is at the forefront of Sedarat's project, particularly in the first four chapters where the case for Emerson as "the progenitor American

[2]Kane, "Emerson and Hafiz," 123. The correspondence of philosophical expression between Emerson and the poets of medieval Persia has also been explored in works such as Carpenter's *Emerson and Asia* and Christy's *The Orient in American Transcendentalism*. Sedarat refers to all three works.

poet-translator" is made through a detailed, if unsystematic, examination of his translation practice (p. 136).

Sedarat's approach is interesting, and as far as I know unprecedented: he takes "influence" to work a-temporally, so to speak, so that Emerson's innate affinity with Persia's medieval verse tradition is the active principle in his relationship with that tradition. There is, in fact, a radical twist to Sedarat's rendition of Emerson's Persian engagements; Emerson's exposure to classical Persian poetry, Sedarat argues, completed his aesthetics; it endowed him with a "balanced soul" (p. 25). But the completion and the "Platonic integration of Persian poetry" occurred not just because Emerson saw a reflection of his own philosophy in the poetry of Saʿdi and Hafez, but because he "anticipated," in what we could describe a Bloomian (or Borgesian) metaleptic reversal, "these Persian poets of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries" (pp. 25 and 195).[3] This is by far the most daring and the most speculative aspect of Sedarat's study, but it remains uncorroborated; at no point is it made clear how, exactly, the "appropriative" method of translation worked in the "real-world" context of the mid-nineteenth century United States. Sedarat seems to dismiss the fact that an epithet such as "classical," with which he repeatedly labels Emerson's "foreign" poetry of choice, is by definition *temporal*; it indicates a specific historical timeframe and a set of cultural, political, and social parameters that are inherent to the identity and the expression of figures such as Saʿdi and Hafez whom Emerson is deemed to have anticipated or preceded. The main issue here, though, is Sedarat's attempt to make something out of Emerson's Persian engagements that is unnecessary and unwarranted. Emerson's Persian appropriations are valuable by themselves; they are manifestations of one of America's earliest attempts to engage with Persia's literary-cultural legacy. Sedarat, however, treats them differently; he takes them as an indication of the American genius and superiority; he uses them to give America an earliness that is untrue.

Sedarat bases his assumptions on a notion of "Platonic atemporality"; this is the conjectural framework through which he connects Emerson with Persia and the Persians.[4] In chapter 1, for instance, he draws on Platonism to endorse Emerson's "disregard of differences in language, literary tradition, religion, and even time," and thus absolves Emerson's lack of first-hand knowledge of Persian language and literary culture (p. 30). There is some truth to Sedarat's argument here, since philosophical and rhetorical correspondences are considered more integral to Emerson's theory of translation than linguistic equivalence; the thematic congruence between an idea such as Platonic unity and beliefs such as *tawhid* ("Oneness of God") in Islam or

[3]It is intriguing that Sedarat begins his book with Borges' sonnet, "Emerson," and uses it as a foundation to illustrate various claims about Emerson and influence and translation; but he forgets to mention that his underlying claim also echoes Borges's well-known essay "Kafka and his Precursors" ("Kafka y sus precursors"). Borges' essay was published in 1951 in the newspaper, *La Nación*, and included a year later in *Otras Inquisiciónes* ("Other Inquisitions").

[4]Sedarat uses the term "Iran" in his book. In this study, I have preferred "Persia" and "Persian," as these were the terms in common use in the nineteenth century. These appellations, for instance, are used more than twenty times in Emerson's essay, "Persian poetry"; "Iran" is not mentioned even once.

https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2020.1786879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

wahdat al-wujūd ("Unity of Being") in Sufism does indeed allow a less accurate form of transference from Persian to English; but again this thematic closeness, this transferability, does not grant Emerson an identity or status equal to that of Saʿdi or Hafez, nor does it place him before or beyond them.

In describing what he identifies as Emerson's all-encompassing translation practice, as well as Emerson's rhetorical expressions, Sedarat also engages with a number of literary theories. This theoretical scaffolding is spread across *Emerson in Iran*, but it is arguably most prominent in chapter 2, where Sedarat draws on Lacan's idea of the "mirror stage," Harold Bloom's theory of influence, Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space of enunciation," and Willis Barnstone's views on influence and translation to make a conceptual correlation between one of Emerson's key philosophical expressions and Sufi mysticism. Sedarat here describes Emerson's idea of the "transparent eyeball" as a discursive transcendental lacuna in which he is able to overcome and reinvent all foreign influences. He then focuses on the metaphor of the mirror in Sufism, whereby polishing a mirror is interpreted symbolically for attaining spiritual purity. Emerson, Sedarat maintains, clears his self in the same manner "to accommodate a plethora of voices in his intertextual reinvention of the American tradition" (p. 60). This identification of Emerson's "transparent eyeball" as a formative third space that accommodates "new orientations and interventions" reinforces Sedarat's perception of Emerson's translation as an all-embracing entity (p. 14). The complexity of thought with which Sedarat deconstructs Emerson's philosophical method is also particularly sharp and insightful; Sedarat draws on a number of critical theories to redefine Emerson's abstruse expression within the discourse of Sufi mysticism. This theoretical conception of Sedarat's methodology is the most distinctive feature of his work and differentiates him from almost all of his precursors.[5]

Nevertheless, the speculative nature of the book remains a drawback. Allow me to return to Sedarat's central argument that Emerson, in the middle of the nineteenth century, could have "anticipated his Persian predecessors" (p. 6). Emerson's intellectual and philosophical views may indeed have corresponded with those of Saʿdi and Hafez (and there is, by the way, nothing particularly exceptional or unprecedented about a notional or spiritual connection of that kind; Edward FitzGerald, at around the same time in Britain, saw a reflection of his own religious perplexities in the mirror of the Persian *rubáiyát* that were attributed to Omar Khayyám). But to reinterpret this intellectual affinity within the framework of a "Platonic atemporality" which places Emerson before and beyond the "classical Sufi masters whom he revered" is uncalled for (p. 2). True, Emerson's Platonic view of the world, his interest in intertextuality, and his ability to disregard "local distinctions as impediments to a grander aesthetic effect" may place his "appropriative" translation method before that of someone like Ezra Pound (p. 120). But this can only be so because Emerson preceded Pound in time; Saʿdi and Hafez lived centuries before him. Moreover, the sense of hegemony or centrality that Sedarat, through his deployment of the

[5]Hamid Dabashi's *Persophilia* is an example of a study that assumes a theoretical approach in studying Persia's cultural relevance within the discursive realms of the western imagination.

https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2020.1786879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Bloomian (Oedipal) framework of "usurping," strives to impute to Emerson is drastically at odds with his own attempt to define Emerson's translation practice with mystical principles that have roots in abstinence and asceticism, with a self-effacing Sufi practice such as *fana'* ("renunciation of self") which, according to Sedarat himself, "describes the poetry and the prose of Emerson who seeks a similar self-annihilation" (pp. 2 and 65).

These inconsistencies appear in other parts of the book, particularly where Sedarat attempts to substantiate the mutuality of influence that he envisions between Emerson and his Persian predecessors We see this, for instance, in chapter 3, where he suggests there is "reciprocal" influence between Emerson and Sa'di (p. 84). Sedarat's commentary here does not quite explain how Sa'di could have "first decided to read" Emerson (p. 84). The passage from William R. Alger's 1856 anthology *The Poetry of the East* does not clarify things either; nor does the reference to Jeffery Einboden, which Sedarat brings immediately after, and without any critical intervention (p. 86). The excerpt from Oliver Wendell Holmes ("it is sometimes hard to tell what is from the Persian from what is original") also appears to be in relation to the subtle nature of Emerson's renditions rather than a sense of self-identification that he may have had with Sa'di (p. 86). Here, Sedarat once again resorts to Platonism, stating how Emerson through "Platonic unification … demonstrates an appropriative tendency to disavow temporal and linguistic differences as he equates his tradition and his own Romantic identity to the identity of the Persian poet" (pp. 86–7). The implications of this "appropriative tendency" remain indistinct in Sedarat's study. But his assumption that a correspondence of thoughts and traditions might have enticed Emerson's Persian engagements is valid. Emerson, as mentioned earlier, was most likely drawn to Sa'di because he saw in his work a set of familiar and self-reflecting intellectual and rhetorical tendencies. Sedarat highlights a number of these: Emerson's writing, like that of Sa'di, is "fragmented" (consists of poetry and prose), "moralizing," "thrives on aphorism," and "resists stable signification"—which is at odds with Sedarat's own unyielding identification of Sa'di as a "Sufi poet" (p. 85). But even these do not explain how "as much as Emerson envisions Sa'di's portrait before his respective biographical discovery, Sa'di too sees Emerson coming" (p. 85). Again, the issue here is not Sedarat's uncritical or unsystematic inclusion of secondary sources; it is his insistence on presenting Emerson as an unparalleled, originary poet-translator, "the great original American visionary" (p. 2). Later in the third chapter, for instance, we read: "Taking Bloom's 'revisionary ratio' between poet and precursor as Persian reflection, Emerson identifies so strongly with the thirteenth-century Sufi poet that they effectively become one" (p. 90). It is not clear which one of Bloom's "revisionary ratios" Sedarat is referring to here; but if it is *Daemonization*, or the "revisionary ratio of de-individuating the precursor," which he mentions two pages earlier, there is then another inconsistency in his conception of Emerson's all-inclusive approach to translation (p. 88). According to Sedarat, Emerson, in the poem "Uriel" (1847), "locates much of the Western tradition, along with himself, in a Persian poet upon whom he predicates his transcendent vision" (p. 88). I am not concerned with the accuracy of Sedarat's readings here; what he appears to be suggesting is that Sa'di's identity is

https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2020.1786879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

not assimilated or integrated with Emerson's, but rather vacated, usurped, to use the Oedipal term. But the problem here is that, regardless of the book's Bloomian or Freudian framework, the attribution of such *appropriative* form of cultural engagements to Emerson is still at odds with Sedarat's identification of Emerson with a humanist poet-philosopher like Saʿdi, whose writings, as Sedarat himself says, "encompass broader humanistic themes amenable to the West" (p. 31). The invasive nature of what Sedarat seems to be attributing to Emerson becomes particularly notable in light of something he states earlier: "establishing himself *a priori* the religion of his classical literary inheritors, Emerson effectively empties out integral linguistic and cultural foundations of his source author, resurrecting the Persian author in his own name and on his own American terms" (p. 87). If this is Sedarat's version of what he takes on to be Emerson's "appropriative" translation method, whereby Saʿdi has effectively turned into a hollow cognomen, how is this different from various other interventionist treatments of Persia's poetic figures and traditions in the nineteenth century?

Another weakness in *Emerson in Iran* is its lack of critical attention to context. Some of Sedarat's suggestions, in other words, are only valid within the theoretical framework of his study. Take, for instance, the transcendental transparency that he attributes to Emerson, and through which he tries to obviate Emerson's disregard of cultural differences. Sedarat's view of Emerson as a godly, all-encompassing poet-translator is problematic (p. 52). Emerson was after all a product of his time, a nineteenth-century western intellectual with his own set of preconceptions towards the Orient. True, he had sympathetic, self-probing interests in the Orient; but like many of his contemporaries, he was not immune to the stereotypes of ignorance and fatalism that disfigure so many contemporary western accounts of Oriental and Islamic societies (Sedarat's chapter 3 is a study of Emerson's dismissive attitude towards Islamic fatalism).[6] In fact, one only needs to read the first few lines of Emerson's essay "Persian Poetry," which he published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1858, to see manifestations of his biases: "Oriental life and society ... stand in violent contrast with the multitudinous detail, the secular stability, and the vast average of comfort of the Western nations."[7] Emerson resorts to stereotypes, even in his description of the Persians' Persian poetic techniques, for which he had a love: "they use an inconsecutiveness [that is] quite alarming to Western logic," rendering Persians and Persian poetry intellectually inferior and bereft of systematic reasoning. Curiously, Sedarat, in chapter 3, draws on Emerson's appreciation of Saʿdi's "inconsecutiveness" to draw a correlation between the two (p. 85). Later, he once again explores this connection in his commentary on the poem "Uriel"; the "words that Emerson's 'SAID' transcribes an *antithetical Eastern aesthetic* [my emphasis]: Line in Nature is not found; / Unit and universe are round" (p. 88). Notwithstanding the discredited nature of what we may today describe as Orientalist views, which render eastern people intellectually

[6]Obeidat's "Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Muslim Orient," which Sedarat cites a number of times in his book, is a study of Emerson's ambivalent attitudes towards the Orient.

[7]Emerson, "Persian Poetry," 124.

https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2020.1786879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

inferior, the idea that Persia's lyric poetry lacks philosophical wholeness or structural uniformity has long been refuted.[8] But even if these "modern" correctives were not at hand, Sedarat's attribution of a divine inclusive vision to Emerson would still be unwarranted outside the theoretical context of his work. Emerson would have had his own politics in poetry, as did Saʿdi and Hafez.

A word also needs to be said about Sedarat's excessive reliance on western theoretical models in surveying an imaginative and intellectual entity that is by design culturally multifaceted. I understand that Sedarat's propensity for using western theoretical frameworks is in tandem with his methodological preference, with his decision to focus on Emerson's writings and less on the Persian originals. But given the multifarious nature of Emerson's Persian engagements, Sedarat's deployment of critical apparatuses that are unmindful of non-western intellectual traditions has created an ideological incongruity in his work. In light of the passion with which Sedarat speaks of Saʿdi and Hafez, and the admiration which, as he rightly notes, Emerson had for the Persian poets, not to mention the inclusive all-encompassing conception of translation that he aims to attribute to Emerson, it is ironic that the approach he has chosen in studying this intricate process of cultural transmission only treats modern European modes of criticism as normative, rendering the discourses that focus on the life and the thematic and stylistic constituents of the works of these Persian lyricists insignificant and undeserving. In that sense, Sedarat is open to the charge of doing what he accuses Harold Bloom of doing: "demonstrating a recurring critical bias towards Western literary and philosophic origins" (p. 13). A more pluralistic approach, whereby the examination of Emerson's Persian appropriations would not have only taken place within western theoretical frameworks, would have made *Emerson in Iran* a more balanced, more inclusive study.

By way of conclusion, I will focus on Sedarat's characterization of Emerson's translation practice as "transformative." Part of Sedarat's overarching argument is that "in attempting to translate foreign verse," Emerson "exposes an overriding aesthetic of global literary appropriation that becomes especially generative for the American literary tradition" (p. 10). Sedarat explores this topic in the book's two concluding chapters, where he attempts to uncover what he considers to be an after-effect of Emerson's translation practice in two markedly dissimilar approaches to classical Persian poetry: one known for its loose and imaginative appropriation, the other for its learned and careful treatment of thematic and stylistic conventions. Sedarat's line of thought in these chapters is, however, odd: for instance, he compares Emerson to contemporary poet-translators who, as he himself acknowledges, are notorious for their uninformed method.[9] But why make these comparisons when it is clear that these modern writers are "ignorant of the Persian language, culture, and literary tradition," whereas Emerson

[8]Arberry, "Orient Pearls at Random Strung"; Boyce, "A Novel Interpretation of Hafiz." Also see Browne, *A Literary History*, ii, 84.

[9]He quotes Murat Nemat-Nejat's review of Ladinsky's *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz The Great Sufi Master* (1999): "There is not a single poem (*gazel*) of Hafiz of which any one of the poems [...] is a translation or adaptation or extrapolation or deconstruction" (p. 144).

https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2020.1786879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

worked closely and meticulously on the German texts "to offer," in Yohannan's words, "a fair sampling of Persian poetry."[10] It is also curious that in order to yet again introduce Emerson as a hegemonic poet-translator, Sedarat, in chapter 6, claims that, as much as Emerson's theory of translation encourages modern translators' "variance from the foreign texts," (p. 175) his "adherence to the original verse of Hafez and Saʿdi" (p. 175) influences the more learned translations of Persian too. Discounting the far-reaching range of impact that Sedarat hopes to attribute to Emerson's translation strategy here, it is unclear why, in upholding this framework, he then focuses on Dick Davis' essay "On Not Translating Hafez" instead of one of his many translations of Hafez, or on Agha Shahid's appropriation of the *ghazal* verse form instead of his rendition of Persian poetry.

Sedarat's discussion of Emerson as "transformative" represents him as a singular, if not exceptional figure. This, in my opinion, is a repercussion of Sedarat's decision to study Emerson's Persian engagements autonomously and without any substantial attention to context. Reading through Sedarat's narrative, one might think that Emerson's appropriation of these Persian poets took place in a vacuum, that Emerson was not part of a large network of Orientalist exchange in the nineteenth century. Sedarat makes no attempt to study Emerson's Persian expressions and engagements comparatively and in relation to other contemporary translations of Persian poetry. It does not become clear, for instance, how Emerson's "appropriative" method of translation differs from other nineteenth-century translations of Persian poetry, from, for example, a work such as Matthew Arnold's "Sohrab and Rustum" (1853), whose source in Firdausi's *Shahnameh* had similarly reached Arnold via a third intermediary language, or from other translations of Hafez in the long nineteenth century, ranging from Sir William Jones' "A Persian Song of Hafiz" (1772) to Gertrude Bell's *Poems from the Divan of Hafiz* (1897).[11] In his engagement with classical Persian poetry, Emerson was certainly not unmindful of the nineteenth-century European scholarship on Persian literature. One of his only two major essays on Persian poetry was a preface that he wrote for an 1865 release of Francis Gladwin's *Gulistan: or Rose Garden* in America. The edition featured a critical essay on Saʿdi by James Ross, another nineteenth-century English translator, and Emerson, as Jahanpour notes, had read Ross's translation of *Gulistan* (1258), too.[12] Yohannan mentions that Emerson was probably even familiar with the works of Edward Byles Cowell, the nineteenth-century scholar of Sanskrit and Persian who introduced Edward FitzGerald to Persian language and literature. The key text behind Emerson's Persian translations, Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall's, *Der Diwan von Moham med Schemseddin Hafis* (1812–13), which Emerson studied in the early years of the 1840s, was also a major work of European scholarship in the nineteenth century, though "before

[10]Yohannan, "Emerson's Translations of Persian Poetry," 408.

[11]Jones' translation originally appeared in *A Grammar of the Persian Language* (1771) with a different title: "A Persian Song." The name "Hafiz" was appended to the title a year later when the poem was reprinted in *Poems, Consisting Chiefly of Translation from the Asiatic Languages*.

[12]Jahanpour, "Emerson on Hafiz and Saʿdi," 118.

https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2020.1786879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

immersing himself in von Hammer's translations," as Jahanpour explains, "Emerson had already come across many other translations from Persian poetry and references to Persian poets."[13] About these and their possible impacts on Emerson's "appropriation" of Saʿdi and Hafez, *Emerson in Iran* has little to say.

Sedarat's treatment of the Persian dimension of Emerson's cross-cultural endeavors is also meager. Sedarat's engagement with Persia's literary tradition is indirect and derivative; not only does he not offer any substantial, first-hand critique of Saʿdi's or Hafez's writing, much of what he says about the thematic, imaginative, and formal constituents of classical Persian poetry seems borrowed. More importantly, there is very little Persian poetry in *Emerson in Iran*. Discounting the translation of the celebrated verse from Fable 10 in chapter 1 of the *Gulistan*, which Sedarat casually labels as Saʿdi's "famous Bani Adam" or "Children of Adam poem," and Dick Davis's translation of a *bayt* (distich) from Hafez's *ghazal* 321 in chapter 6, there is no direct or identifiable translation of Persian poetry in the book (p. 31).[14] There are occasional mistakes and omissions, too: for example, the epigraph at the beginning of chapter 3 is attributed to Saʿdi, whereas the quotation is actually from Emerson's essay, "Saadi" (1842); at the end of chapter 1, "The Phoenix," Sedarat says, is "Emerson's rather well-known translation of the first twenty lines from a Hafez poem," without giving any further information (p. 46). This absence of detailed and scholarly attention to Persia's literary culture is perhaps most evident in Sedarat's reductive identification of Saʿdi and Hafez as "Sufis." There is a discussion of these poets' complex views on Sufis and Sufism in many of Sedarat's sources, including Homa Katouzian's *Saʿdi: The Poet of Life, Love and Compassion*, Dick Davis's *Faces of Love: Hafez and the Poets of Shiraz*, and Kane's "Emerson and Hafiz."[15] Many, if not most readers of Sedarat's book will not be aware of such nuances, and Thoreau's motto, "Simplify, simplify," will not do here.[16]

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https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2020.1786879

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Sedarat's own translations of the lines form Hafez's qazals 68 and 5 in chapter 2 are also presented reticently and in the margin of the discussions

[15] Katouzian, *Saʿdi: The Poet of Life*; Davis, *Faces of Love*.

[16] Thoreau, *Walden*, 91.

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