




of the Persianate literary past, tells very similar stories in Iran and India, whereas the third chapter, on the arrival of Orientalist preoccupations with literary origins, is a study in contrast. In the former case, this book's most notable contribution is to show that it is not only the classical Persianate presentation of sexuality that is highly conventional. Just as the pedestrian scenarios of traditional poetry only sometimes reflected social realities, Jabbari highlights the gap between Browne and Shibli Nu'mani's scrupulous excision of homoeroticism from the canon and their more adventurous private lives. Modern literary history, he shows, "like literature itself, . . . can sometimes be completely detached from life experiences" (97). The third chapter sets Iranian scholars' growing preoccupation in the early twentieth century with purity of origins—the search for continuities between "Old Persian" (Avestan), the various idioms treated as "Middle Persian," and the Persian language and literature of the Islamic period—in contrast with Urdu scholars' embrace of hybrid origins. The reasons for this divergence are clear enough: Islam became a sign of national difference in India, so traces of Arabic became important to Urdu-writing Indian scholars just as they became embarrassing to Iranian scholars.

The final chapter turns to the role of grammatology in Persianate modernity, with a scrupulous attention to the *nuqāt* (finer points) of orthography, scripts, lithography, typesetting, and, in the book's greatest tour de force, punctuation. Here, as in the third chapter, each case study is used to draw out paths not taken in the other case. By clearing away a series of persistent myths, including the superiority of Latin script to Arabic for purposes of literacy and the impossibility of a nastaliq print culture, Jabbari leaves the reader with a sense of the contingency of outcomes in national language reforms that have often been regarded as inevitable. The book concludes with a final reflection on the ongoing asymmetry of knowledge between Persian scholars and Urdu scholars today, including in Iranian and Pakistani academia. It is Persian studies, it seems, that needed the category of the Persianate, to recover a horizon of possibility that South Asian scholars had never forgotten.

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Reorienting Modernism in Arabic and Persian Poetry, Levi Thompson, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023, 231 pages. £75.00. ISBN: 978-1-009-16447-4

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Levi Thompson's *Reorienting Modernism in Arabic and Persian Poetry* argues for a new understanding of Persian and Arabic modernist poetry that considers the two languages' shared literary heritage, the poetries' common mythologies with Mesopotamian origins, and the poets' own sense of transnational and anti-imperialist solidarities to be more important than Western influence, which, according to the author, has received disproportionate attention in previous studies. Published as part of the Cambridge Studies in World Literature series, the book challenges criteria like "canon, prestige, or economic power" for determining which works gain entry into a single body of "World Literature" (p. 96). Instead, Thompson's study demonstrates the possibility of seeing the simultaneity of independent but concurrently developing literatures within global literary systems. Accordingly, Thompson proposes a revised geography of the modernist poetries studied in the book,

one that locates Mesopotamia at its center and treats Persian and Arabic poets as the primary makers of their own poetic movements. On this new literary map, Western metropolises like London and Paris—so often treated as singular points of reference for literary modernism the world over—occupy the periphery. It is a brilliantly argued and beautifully articulated study that shows just how much the field of Persian literary studies stands to benefit from genuinely comparative and theoretically rigorous work.

The book presents case studies of poems by five well-known Iranian and Iraqi modernists—Nima Yushij, Ahmad Shamlu, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, ‘Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati, and Forugh Farrokhzad—across individual chapters that argue for an interconnectedness among them despite both their differences and the fact that Iranians and Iraqis did not necessarily write with an awareness of the other’s works. Thompson’s case for reading the poets in a way that may initially seem counterintuitive—going against existing models of national literature on the one hand, and of West-to-East modernist influence on the other—rests on two equally strong foundations that run throughout the book. On the one hand, Thompson conducts close, careful readings attuned to similarities in the poems’ forms, metrical experimentations, and intertextuality. At the same time, the study maintains a macroscopic theoretical view, drawing on theories of relativity, polysystems, global modernism, and unconscious and conscious transnationalism (among others) that show how neither poems, poets, nor, indeed, even languages can be read meaningfully in isolation or as closed systems.

In terms of theory, the concept most central to the book is what Thompson refers to variously as the “planetary,” “global,” or, his preferred term, “the transnational.” Transnationalism in simple terms involves looking beyond the national paradigm, within which studies of Iranian modernism, for example, have heretofore been confined, and seeking connections across nation-state and linguistic borders. Thompson further distinguishes between “unconscious” transnationalism, wherein, for example, Iranian and Iraqi modernists remained unaware of their development along parallel trajectories, and “conscious” transnationalism by which poets intentionally aligned their work—whether through form, ideology, or otherwise—with movements and people in other national contexts (p. 10). Particularly strong cases of the latter occurred with the Iranian Ahmad Shamlu (chapter three), who forged poetic ties with Lorca in Spain and anti-imperialist soldiers in Korea, and the Iraqi al-Bayati (chapter five), who expressed a lifelong fascination with Iranian civilization and Persian literature as he encountered it in Arabic translation. These cases illustrate how consciously and deeply the poets imagined themselves within a world where East-East solidarities proved as—or more—meaningful than their political, cultural, or literary connections to either the West or the Soviet Union.


At an *unconscious* level, as Thompson shows, Persian and Arabic modernists held strikingly similar views about how to “break” from their shared system of classical poetry in efforts to make poetry new, even if they were not thinking about how they shared that system with one another. Students of Persian or Arabic literature will likely know that the system of prosody (*aruz*) originates in Arabic poetry and may likewise have some awareness of how to scan classical poems by short and long syllables to determine the meter (which is detailed in chapter one). But Thompson does not merely state Persian and Arabic poetry’s shared metrical heritage as a theoretical proposition or index poems’ metrical structure for others to scan; rather, he conducts close readings that include careful scansion, especially of poems by Nima (chapter two), al-Sayyab (chapter four), and Farrokhzad (chapter six), to show exactly how these poets took the classical foot as their basic poetic structure, experimenting with line lengths and sound patterns to explore new aesthetic and semantic possibilities while never abandoning the classical system entirely. Thus, while we often refer to “Nimaic” poetry in Persian, which implies Nima as the singular instigator of the formal innovations we have come to think of as Persian modernism, Thompson refers to the “Khalilian” or, at times, the “Arabic” system of prosody to emphasize that Nima and his disciples—like Shamlu and Farrokhzad—drew from the same origins as Arabic modernists, regardless of

whether they held any interest in each other's languages or thought of their poetic tradition as transnational in the way Thompson conceptualizes it.

The case for a new map of literary modernism that places Mesopotamia at its center and Europe and North America at its periphery relates directly to a political stance from which Thompson does not shy away. As he states early in the book, his position of writing from "the decaying heart of US empire" motivates his efforts to think beyond national identities (p. 10). In this regard, *Reorienting Modernism* joins a growing body of scholarship that explicitly challenges the politics shaping studies of World Literature today. In Iranian Studies, two forthcoming books, Aria Fani's *Reading across Borders* and Sam Hodgson's *Persianate Verse and the Poetics of Eastern Internationalism*, promise to further demonstrate East-East literary connections in a conscious effort to problematize either nationalism or globalized, West-centered World Literature as our primary frames of reference for literary studies. *Reorienting Modernism in Arabic and Persian Poetry* should be essential reading for anyone interested in this new crop of politically provocative scholarship. Thompson's study demonstrates how careful, theoretically rigorous, aesthetically sensitive, and historically informed readings of the most well-known Persian and Arabic modernist poets can produce fresh insights into both the poetics themselves and the ideologies by which we make sense of the world.

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Underground: The Secret Life of Videocassettes in Iran. Blake Atwood (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021). 252 pp. ISBN 9780262542845

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In the past decade or so, several Iranian movies have been produced that depict the domain of informal film circulation and the pivotal role that video dealers play. An example is Jafar Panahi's *Tehran Taxi* (2015), which offers a glimpse into this underground media infrastructure. In this film, Panahi assumes the role of a taxi driver, picking up passengers as he drives a yellow cab through the streets of Tehran. Along the way, he engages in conversations and records these interactions primarily using a dashboard-mounted camera. Early in the movie, a passenger adamantly insists that Panahi should recognize him. He later introduces himself as Omid "Filmi," the dealer who used to deliver movies to Panahi's home. We gain more insights into Omid's activities when he asks Panahi to take him to his customer's place to deliver some films. He claims that his job constitutes a form of "cultural activity" that is central to the Iranian movie culture, serving as the sole means of accessing films that have been restricted by the state.

For international critics who celebrated *Tehran Taxi* as a "subversive piece of underground filmmaking," Omid's labor might appear to be a frivolous endeavor, perhaps even deserving a chuckle.¹ For Iranian viewers, Omid and others like him "reawaken" memories of a long-established, intricately woven underground media network, a space that facilitates alternative film experiences, transcending the constraints imposed by the state. This

¹ Dana Stevens, "The Cab Ride as Artistic Rebellion," Slate, October 2, 2015, <https://slate.com/culture/2015/10/jafar-panahis-film-taxi-reviewed.html>.