




The Rebellion of Forms in Modern Persian Poetry: Politics of Poetic Experimentation. Farshad Sonboldel (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024). 232 pages. \$120. ISBN: 9788765103609

Reviewed by Levi Thompson , University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA
Email: levi.thompson@austin.utexas.edu

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There remain only a few book-length treatments of modern Persian poetry available in English. Farshad Sonboldel's *The Rebellion of Forms in Modern Persian Poetry: Politics of Poetic Experimentation* expands the available scholarship—still best represented by Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak's *Recasting Persian Poetry: Scenarios of Poetic Modernity in Iran* (originally published in 1995)—by turning a critical eye on experimental and avant-garde poetry that has until now remained outside the purview of most studies, whether in English, Persian, or other languages. To do so, Sonboldel on the one hand engages thoroughly with Persian criticism, including luminaries such as Yahyā Āryānpur (d. 1985), Rezā Barāhani (d. 2022), and Mohammad Shams Langrudi (b. 1950), among many others. On the other hand, he draws on an eclectic range of Western literary theory, most prominently through his use of *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* by Harold Bloom (d. 2019); *Politics of Literature* by Jacques Rancière (b. 1940); *The Arcades Project* by Walter Benjamin (d. 1940); and two books, both titled *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, by Peter Bürger (d. 2017) and Renato Poggioli (d. 1963). “I attempted to read and re-evaluate the works at hand within the discourse of world literature as interconnected modernisms,” Sonboldel explains his process, “instead of viewing them as isolated, local cultural products. In the absence of Iranian theories on which to build my arguments, I transposed the literary theories developed in the Western critical tradition to the narratives of Iranian scholars from the poetic change in Iran” (4). Western theory, then, assists Sonboldel's reassessment of Persian poetry's development from the late nineteenth until the mid-twentieth century, and he spends ample time working through the implications of such theoretical applications across different cultural contexts.

The Rebellion of Forms addresses the role of alternative poetry in Persian across four periods: those of the Bāzgasht “Literary Return” movement, which Sonboldel situates from 1780 to 1900; the Mashruteh period of the Constitutional Revolution (1900–1920); “post-constitutional poetry” (1920–1940); and “finally the domination of modernism (1940–1960)” (2). The book retraces the paths taken by some already well-known poets across these decades in its analyses of the poetry of, for instance, Mohammad-Taqi Bahār (d. 1951); Mirzādeh ‘Eshqī (d. 1924); Mirzā Taqi Khān Rafat (d. 1920); Abolqāsem Lāhuti (d. 1957); Shams Kasmā'i (d. 1961); and Nimā Yushij (d. 1960). However, Sonboldel reads their works against the grain by highlighting their more radical poetry, such as Bahār's inclusion of colloquial Persian phrases, by which “the poet democratically redistributes to all components of the poem the right to exist, regardless of whether their roots are elite or common” (34). Throughout, Sonboldel limns how poetic experiments in Persian are bound up with broader political concerns in Iranian society, often taking recourse to Bloom's and Rancière's theorizations of the “aesthetic regime”: “That is, the poetic father represents the undemocratic, hierarchical, aesthetic regime, the disruption of which is the genuine politics of literature” (5). In his analysis of Nimā's career, such an approach leads to a surprising, yet convincing, conclusion that the eventual mainstreaming of Nimā's poetry, which retained a close relationship with “classical” Persian poetry's metrical foundations and content, only “suggests a new regime of aesthetics,

[but] does not entirely reject traditional poetics” (112), making it much less radical than critics have previously been willing to admit.

From here, Sonboldel’s book goes on to make its most substantial contributions in its treatment of experimental and avant-garde poets from the 1930s to the 1950s. These include Mohammad Moqaddam (d. 1996), Zabih Behruz (d. 1972), and Shin Partow (d. 1997)—experimental poets treated in chapter 5—and Tondar Kiā (d. 1987) and Hushang Irāni (d. 1973), avant-gardes taken up in chapter 6. The chapters stand out for their critical treatment of this group of marginalized poets whose works have, in some cases, been all but forgotten. This is despite their key contributions to the development of mid-century Persian poetry. For example, through a deep metrical analysis of Behruz’s use of the Persian “rhythmic prose” form (called the *bahr-e tavil*) in his 1927 “poetic play/screenplay” *Shāh-e Irān va Bānu-ye Arman* (The Iranian King and the Lady of Armenia), Sonboldel shows that the poet was able to “distinguish his rhythmic system from that of classical poetry about a decade earlier than Nimā.” This allows him to conclude that “*Shāh-e Irān va Bānu-ye Arman* might be one of Nimā’s sources in creating his *Nimāic* poetic form,” and that Behruz’s metrical developments along with “those of Tondar Kiā might draw scholars’ attention to this experiment as a source of inspiration not only for *Nimāic* poets but also for marginal poets of the later generations” (151, 152). Overall, the book successfully meets its goal of “challenging the canonical narratives of modern Persian poetry” through its detailed readings of these lesser-known poets, which are indeed in many cases “the first instance of their inclusion in academic research” (204).


Furthermore, Sonboldel’s serious approach to metrics, on display throughout the book, ought to be a model for future scholarship in the field of modern Persian poetry. In addition to his treatment of the *bahr-e tavil*’s foundational presence in Behruz’s “poetic play,” Sonboldel makes a conscious effort to discuss prosodic developments wherever necessary. Although I think that uninitiated readers might benefit from some more explanation of the metrical system in Persian early on in the main text—Sonboldel relegates a short exegesis to a footnote on page 43—the attention the book pays to prosody serves an important didactic function. Namely, it shows us what fundamental features of poetry we miss out on when we neglect metrics. Let the book’s section on Kasmā’i’s poems serve as an example. There, Sonboldel takes care to name the meters she employs in two 1920 poems, the second of which (*Medal-e Eftēkār* [The Medallion of Honor]) scans in the *mozāre’-e mosamman-e akhrab-e makfuf-e mahzuf* meter (89), which we have already learned in an earlier footnote “is the third most widely used prosodic metre in Hāfez’s *divān*” (78). It also happens to be the meter Nimā uses for his well-known modernist poem *Qoqnus* (The Phoenix, 1938), which we might understand to be his poetic declaration of *Nimāic* poetry’s genesis through the poem’s demonstration of the formal structures that underlie it. That Kasmā’i uses the same meter decades earlier in a poem that also breaks from the monorhyme of traditional poetry, just as Nimā does in *Qoqnus*, might suggest that modernism’s roots go back further in time than we may have expected.

Sonboldel’s prosodic analyses likewise reveal possible comparative links to other traditions influenced by premodern Arabic metrics, as Persian poetry is, including Arabic poetry itself. By way of example, he discusses Lāhuti’s use of a *morakkab* (a “combined” meter consisting of two different feet coming in succession) versus Kasmā’i’s employment of a *monfared* (a “single” meter, with only one type of foot that repeats): “Thus, the metre of Kasmā’i’s poem is naturally less restricted, in terms of lengthening and shortening the lines. Indeed, the prosodic foot *fa’ulon* (˘ ˘ ˘) can be repeated as many times as the poet wishes, while Lāhuti is obligated to stick to the order and number of prosodic feet in the metrical pattern” (95). Although Kasmā’i does not eschew *morakkab* meters entirely, could it be that her preference for the repeating single foot of a *monfared* one in this case matches the Iraqi woman poet Nāzīk al-Malā’ikah’s (d. 2007) clear admonishment of the Arabic modernist poets to avoid compound meters in their *shi’r ḥurr* (“free verse”) poetry? There is clearly more work to do here, and Sonboldel’s contribution offers a good starting point.

I have a few minor criticisms to mention in closing. There are some small oversights in the bibliography of *The Rebellion of Forms*, which does not include some of the books cited in the footnotes, Sirius Tāhbāz's edition of Nimā's *Majmu'eh* and Kamran Rastegar's *Literary Modernity between the Middle East and Europe* among them. Although the book's inclusion of Persian text for poetry citations is to be commended, there are inconsistencies in the translation of Persian terms from time to time: *monāzereh* is "argumentation" on page 25 but "poetic debate" on page 59—I should think "poetic debate" preferable. Although most of the transliteration is well done, some mistakes remain. On page 27, the *nisbah* endings on "Bahārieh" and "Khazāniyeh" are inconsistent, and "*moshabah* and *moshabah-beh*" on page 31 ought to be "*moshabbah* and *moshabbah-beh*." These slight issues aside, Sonboldel deftly translates the poetry he analyzes, and readers unfamiliar with or unable to read the Persian will find them an excellent substitute for the originals.

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Review Response. Feeding Iran: Shi'i Families and the Making of the Islamic Republic. Rose Wellman (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021). Pp. 262. \$34.95. ISBN 9780520376878

Reviewed by Rose Wellman , University of Michigan-Dearborn, Dearborn, United States

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I would like to begin my response by thanking the reviewer for engaging with my book, *Feeding Iran*. I am appreciative of his recognition of the in-depth ethnographic fieldwork I conducted with my hosts, their extended family, and their neighbors, which forms the core of the monograph. As an author of a first book based on dissertation research, I have very much appreciated those scholars in anthropology, Iranian studies, and adjacent disciplines who have read my work and provided thoughtful and critical feedback at book talks and other events, much of which I have taken to heart. A book is never done, and I am always learning.

I am compelled to write a response to the reviewer, a senior male scholar in a different academic discipline, for two reasons. First, there are several points within the review that are baseless, misrepresentative of my text, or demeaning to the people with whom I conducted research. Perhaps most harmful is the author's gender-biased, mischaracterization of my host and mother of four children, Nushin, as "over anxious" and "on the verge of a nervous breakdown." *Feeding Iran* is a testament to Nushin's unflappable resilience, strength of character, leadership, hospitality, and care for her family. Other inaccuracies in the review take the form of quotations taken out of context. To give three examples, the reference to eating pomegranate on a Thursday night in my book (p. 97) is specifically attributed to an individual and is not a general claim. Similarly, the reviewer states I write that my hosts' kitchen practices are "typical across the region" (p. 86). In fact, I state in the very same sentence that "the precise way in which they saw food as potent vehicle for danger, transformation, protection, and resilience was shaped by *their location* in a small factory town surrounded by farmland; *their personal metaphysical beliefs* about food, prayer, and ill intention; and their family's politics and membership in the Basij" (p. 86, emphasis added). Furthermore, I do not claim anywhere in my text that Fars-Abad is, in his words,