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"SOMETHING FOREIGN IN IT": A STUDY OF AN IRANIAN TRANSLATION OF WHITMAN'S IMAGE

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Introduction

What happens to Whitman when he enters Iran? What does the Persian Whitman look like? What does his Persianness or his foreignness tell us about Whitman, Iran, and the interaction between the two? This essay answers these questions to elaborate on the dialogue created between American poetry and contemporary Iran through translating Whitman.

Studies of the reception of a writer in another culture primarily deal with the translation of the works into the target language. Such studies usually ignore the translation of the writer's image. The present essay focuses on the translation of an American writer's image into a contemporary Iranian context. In this study, "image" refers both to visual representations, such as pictures or photographs, and the mental conceptions held in common by members of a group, such as is the subject of imagology.

Walt Whitman (1819-1892), commonly referred to as the father of American free verse and the American poet of democracy, has frequently been studied in terms of his reputation, reception, and influence in other countries. Blodgett's 1934 book, *Walt Whitman in England*, the first formal reception study of the poet in an international context, was followed by Betsy Erkkila's *Walt Whitman among the French: Poet and Myth* (1980), Walter Grunzweig's

Constructing the German Walt Whitman (1995), Marta Skwara's *"Polski Whitman": O funkcjonowaniu poety obcego w kulturze narodowej* ["The Polish Whitman": On the Functioning of the Poet in a National Culture] (2010) as well as *Polskie serie recepcyjne wierszy Walta Whitmana* [Polish Serial Reception of Walt Whitman's Poems] (2015). On a smaller scale, Whitman's reception has been studied for such diverse countries as Spain, Brazil, Portugal, Italy, the Former Yugoslavia, Croatia, Slovenia, Russia, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Iceland, Sweden, Israel, India, Korea, China, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada.[1]

The relationship between Whitman and Persian poetry has been studied with regard to similarities and differences in lyrical traditions. The affinity between Whitman and Persian Sufism and/or the influence of the latter on the former can be traced back to the early stages of *Leaves of Grass*. As early as 1866, a distinguished British Orientalist, Lord Viscount Strangford, mentioned the surprising similarity of *Leaves of Grass*, in both content and form, to Persian poetry (Farzan 1976: 573). In spite of the numerous comparative studies on the closeness of Whitman's spirituality and Persian Sufism (Furlanetto 2017; Sharma 2016, 2013, 2009, 2008, 2005; Peivandi 2012; Frabizio 2012; Ahmadsoltani 2009; LeMaster and Jahan 2009), no work has as yet placed emphasis on the reception of the American writer in Iran.

Research in the fields of reception, dissemination, and literary fortune comprises a modest but not insignificant portion of comparative literary studies. Cultural importations do not materialize spontaneously, but according to the ideological necessity of the receptor country (Londero 2012: 134). Reception of a foreign writer happens when the foreign works allow a given country to import

[1]Ed Folsom collected some of the best examples of such studies in his *Whitman East and West: New Contexts for Reading Walt Whitman.*

cultural and ideological elements that either correspond to those of the receiving country or help them develop. "'Reception' studies and studies of 'effect' or 'influence' must go together" (Prawer 1973: 38). The present essay makes use of the well-established analogy between Whitman and Persian literature in its investigation of Whitman's reception in Iran.

This essay studies Whitman's reception in relation to the common image of the poet in contemporary Iran and the current sociopolitical and literary discourses. My object of investigation is a recent book-length Persian translation of Whitman published in Iran to examine the interaction of different literary and sociopolitical discourses that affect the translation of the image of the American poet into an image of a Persian Whitman.

The book chosen for this study is *Man Walt Whitmanam: Gozide-ye She'rha-ye Walt Whitman* [I am Walt Whitman: A Selection of Walt Whitman's Poems] translated into Persian by Mohsen Towhidian and published in Tehran in 2011. This monolingual edition is the third book-length translation of Whitman published in Iran. It contains forty-five poems. The book has 120 pages and provides the reader with a one-page introduction by the translator in which he refers to the "unconventional," "mysterious and colorful" world of Whitman (Towhidian 2011: 11) followed by the poems translated into Persian. The book ends with a chronology of Whitman's life and three photographs supposedly of Whitman, one of which is actually of Robert Frost. The present essay focuses on the front cover of the book.

"The Laughing Philosopher" in a Persian Costume

Image1 is Rumi, a thirteenth-century Persian poet, whose six-book epic poem, *Masnavi* is called the Persian Quran. Image2 is the Persian Whitman on the front cover. As the picture indicates, Whitman on the front cover resembles the Persian mystic poet, suggesting that

Whitman in a Persian costume of a poet-prophet is more positively received by Persians as a Persian poet.

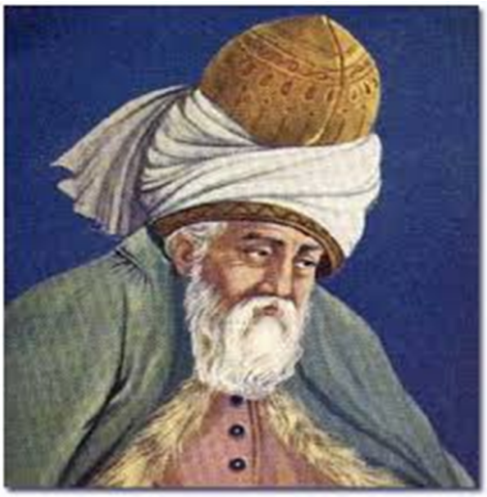

Image1

Image2

By googling the images of Walt Whitman in Persian and in English, one comes up with two distinctly different views of poetry. The image of the middle-aged Whitman that was used for the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 is present among the top results in the Google image searches of Walt Whitman in English (Image 3). It is a popular image of Whitman in the U.S. and belongs to the four earliest images of the poet, all taken before 1855.

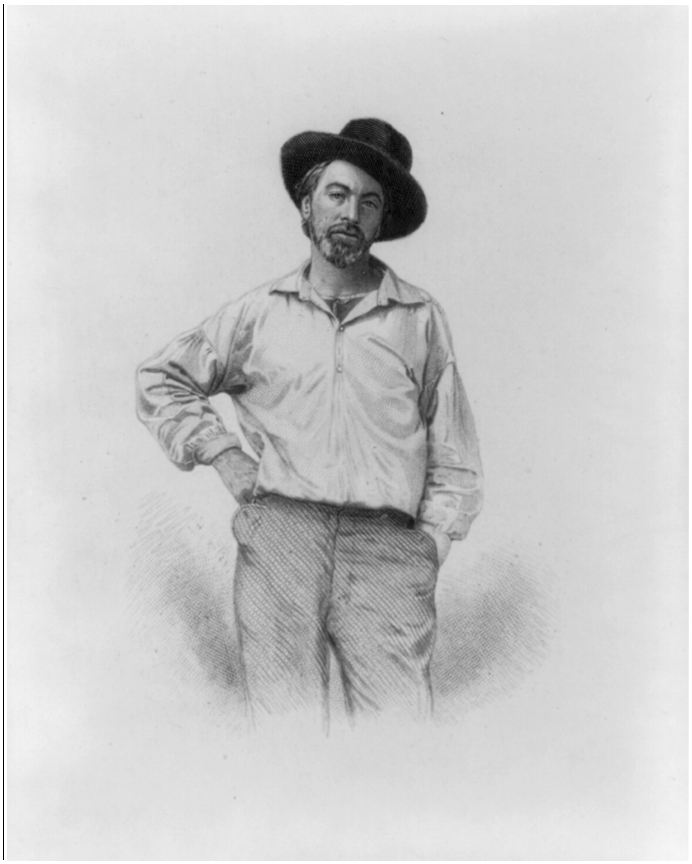

Image3

Although Whitman liked this image very much, some of his friends did not share his enthusiasm for it. Whitman’s friend, William Sloane Kennedy, for example, hoped

> that this repulsive, loaferish portrait, with its sensual mouth, can be dropped from future editions, or be accompanied by other and better ones that show the mature man, and not merely the defiant young revolter of thirty-seven, with a very large chip on his shoulder, no suspenders to his trousers, and his hat very much on one side. (Kennedy 1926: 248)

Comments like this highlight the binary opposition between maturity and youth. The same opposition is prevalent in Persian culture where "youth" suggests ignorance and lack of wisdom. The view expressed here by Kennedy is comparable to that of the Persian readers of poetry who prefer the mature poet. When searched in Persian, this image of Walt Whitman is not to be found among the top results in Google images. What is the popular image of a Persian Whitman?

On the morning of April 15, 1887, George Collins Cox (1851–1903), an American photographer, notable for his portraits of Whitman and Henry Ward Beecher, took some twenty photographs of Whitman. These photographs depict Whitman simply sitting in a big revolving chair, posing to the right or left, with his hat off and on again. Of twelve extant photographs taken during the Cox session, Whitman's favorite was one with the hat, which he began referring to as "The Laughing Philosopher" (Image4). Whitman later asked a friend: "Do you think the name I have given it justified? do you see the laugh in it?" and continued: "I'm not wholly sure: yet I call it that. I can say honestly that I like it better than any other picture of that set: [...] yet I am conscious of something foreign in it [...]" (qtd. in Traubel 1961: 72). What is "foreign" to Whitman in "The Laughing Philosopher" photograph seems to be familiar to his Iranian audience.

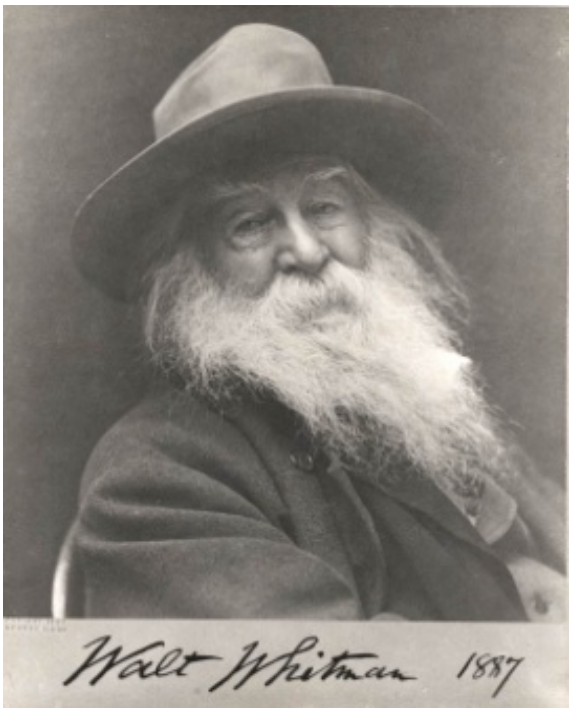

Image 4.“The Laughing Philosopher”, picture

The front cover of the 2011 translation collection by Mohsen Towhidian uses “The Laughing Philosopher” photograph taken on April 15, 1887. What does the Iranian public find familiar in the image of “The Laughing Philosopher”? The picture of an old poet with a long white beard highlights the age of the poet: to Iranian readers —of poetry in particular— age connotes experience and experience represents wisdom. Persian-speaking readers of literature consider poetry a source of wisdom. They refer to poetry to find answers for

such fundamental issues as love, happiness, and beauty. To Persian readers, poetry performs the social and cultural roles played by religion, ethics, and philosophy. In Persian culture, poetry "is traditionally the privileged form of verbal discourse and the preferred vehicle for the transmission of wisdom and knowledge" (Losensky 2012: 1022). Furthermore, the tradition of lettered culture includes the practice of widely citing many lines of Persian poetry in various contexts as a source of wisdom. This idea is illustrated in the title that a U.S.-based Iranian scholar chose for an anthology of Persian poetry, *Persian Words of Wisdom: Sayings and Proverbs by Masters of Persian Poetry*.

While the association between age, wisdom, and poetry is the prevalent feature in classical Persian poetry, it also exists in modern Persian poetry, where this preference has repercussions for the visual imaginary cultivated around living poets. Even when photographs from their younger days are also available, author photos and other visual forms of publicity depict contemporary Persian poets in their old age, as Images 5 to 9 indicate.

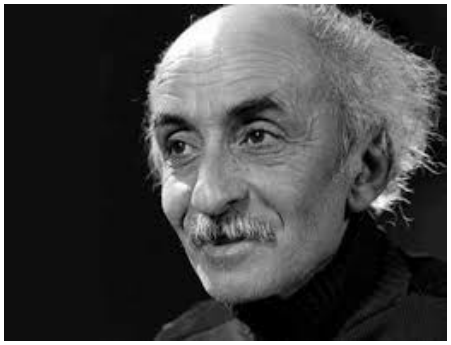

Image 5. Nima Yushij (1887-1960)

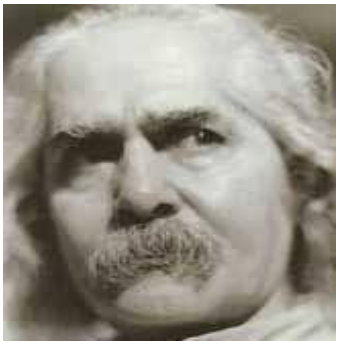

Image 6. Mehdi Akhavan-Sales (1929-1990)

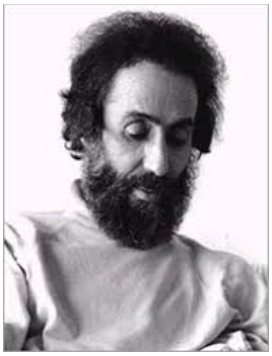

Image 7. Sohrab Sepehri (1928–1980)
Image 8. Ahmad Shamlou (1925–2000)
Image 9. Simin Behbahani (1927-2014)

What is important for the Persian audience is not the real age of the poet, but the wisdom represented by age. As we will see, they prefer another image of Whitman taken in the same year as the portrait Kennedy described as "loaferish." Images 10 and 11 are two of the earliest images of Whitman.

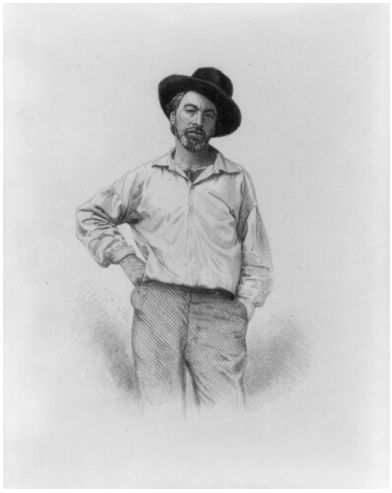

Image 10. July 1854

Image11. Probably 1854

The “loaferish” Whitman is familiar to the American audience, but not the Persian audience, who prefer the older, more mature Whitman. Worth mentioning is the fact that both portraits most likely date from the same year, 1854. However, the Persian audience favors the one in Image11over the one in Image10. Among the earliest images of Whitman, the picture in Image 11 is the most popular with the Persian audience, according to Google-image search results. Therefore, it is not merely age that the Persian audience is looking for in a poet. Whitman's friend, Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke provides us with a useful framework to read this photo. He called it "the Christ likeness," where he saw signs of Whitman's illumination, the "moment this carpenter too became seer. [...] and he saw and knew the Spirit of God." Bucke believed that "something of this spiritual elevation can

still be seen" in this photo (qtd. in *The Whitman Gallery*). These are the very qualities that the Persian readership expects from a poet.

The images of the younger, more casual and rebellious Whitman have found their place in the minds of his Western readers, but that aspect of his image does not register for his Persian audience. Even when the Persian reading public chooses one of the pictures portraying the younger Whitman, they favor the one that looks the oldest and possesses special qualities significant to the Persian image in which a significant, wise poet must always be old.

According to Google image search results, Images 12 to 17are the most popular images of Whitman with the Persian audience. Notice the way these depictions of Whitman that best appeal to the Persian public look considerably older than those of the American Whitman. Not surprisingly, the Persian audience prefers the older, wiser Whitman.

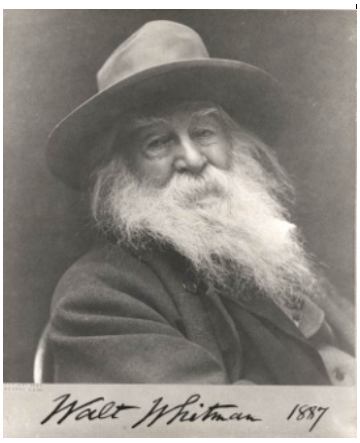

Image 12.1887

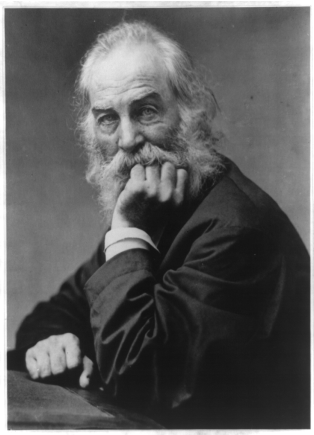
Image 13. 1869–1872

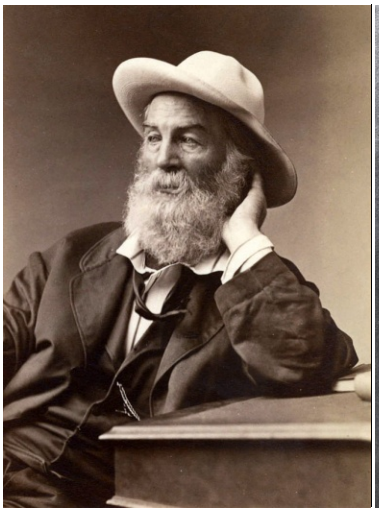
Image 14. 1872

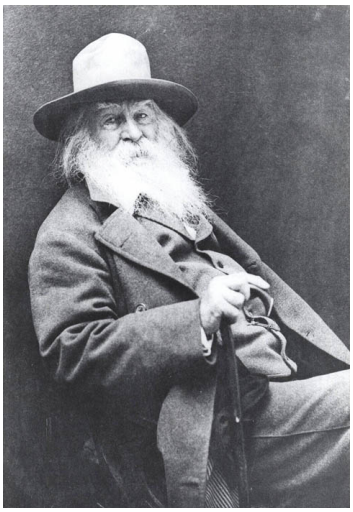
Image 15. 1887

In addition to catering to the distinct preference for the aged, mature poet, the picture chosen for the front cover of the translation by Towhidian depicts Whitman wearing a hat. With this hat serving as a head covering, the poet takes on the aspect of a prophet and looks similar to major Persian poets, including Sa'di, Hafiz, and Rumi, who are depicted wearing a piece of cloth that covers the head (Images 18 to 20).

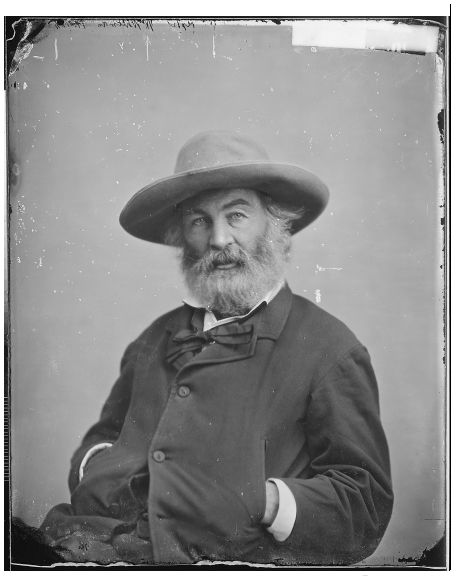

Image 16. Between 1865 and 1867

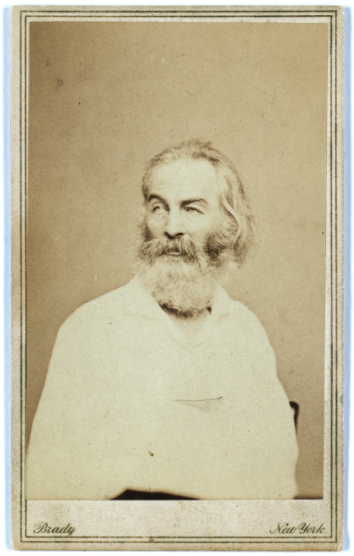

Image 17. Around 1862

Image 18. Sa´di

Image 19. Hafiz

Image 20. Rumi

In the following section, I will discuss what modifications were made to the original 1887 picture of Whitman and what these modifications represent for the readership of the Persian translation. In Whitman’s modified image on the front cover, his face is framed and highlighted. In my interview with the translator, who is coincidentally graphic designer responsible for the front cover, he said that by framing the face he wanted to suggest that this volume was part of a series of poetry in translation (my interview with Mohsen Towhidian). To understand the context for and the impact of the Persian reception of this image, it is helpful to examine the image of the Holy Prophet, Mohammad, in Iran (Images 21 to 24).

Images 21 to 24.The prophet in Iranian popular culture

As the pictures indicate, Iranian images represent the prophet without a face; often, a sphere of light takes its place. In this context, Whitman as the poet-prophet appears to be both a poet *with* a face and a prophet whose face is illuminated (Image 2, above). The contrast between the dark red color of the cover and the light blue square layered over Whitman's visage like a spotlight emphasizes the poet' face. Furthermore, the framing of Whitman's face with red surrounding light blue makes his face and all its details, including the wrinkles, more visible, showing the age of the poet and highlighting his experience and wisdom.

For the Iranian audience, the color blue signifies truth, faith, the heavens, and spirituality; it is frequently used in religious contexts —mosques in particular— as in The Shah Mosque (Image 25) and Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque (Image 26). The blue light on Whitman's face makes the poet appear in the guise of a spiritual figure, a prophet.

Image 25.The Shah Mosque

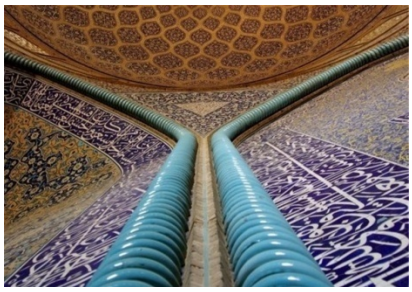

Image 26. Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque

The blue and red on the front cover provide a great contrast. While red symbolizes sexuality and rebellion of different kinds, blue symbolizes spirituality and calmness. This pair of contrasting colors may refer to the contradictory elements in Whitman's poetic voice as he asserts: "Do I contradict myself?/Very well then…. I contradict myself;/I am large…. I contain multitudes" (Whitman 1982: 87). At the same time, it refers to a point of similarity between Whitman and Persian mystical poets: the connection between sexuality and spirituality.

The picture on the front cover is a close-up of the original Whitman picture; it zooms in on the face (refer to Image 27). It emphasizes the self (individuality), a significant theme of the poet, as does the framing of the face. Therefore, the final result is a double focus on the face, and thus a celebration of the poet. Once more, Whitman resembles his Persian counterparts including Khaqani, Sa'di, Hafiz, Saeb and Shahryar who celebrate themselves and their poetic mastery in their poetry.

Image 27

In this way Whitman is also reminiscent of the great mystical figures of Persia. They know no limit to celebrating themselves, as in the example of Mansur Al-Hallaj (c. 858 – March 26, 922), a Persian mystic, revolutionary writer, and teacher of Sufism. He is most famous for his saying: "I am the Truth," which many saw as a claim to divinity. Mansur Al-Hallaj kept saying "Ana al Haq" (Arabic: أنا الحق). Since the Arabic term "haq" can signify both truth and God. His words were interpreted as a claim to divinity and led to his execution.

Persian Poetry, Iranian Politics and Whitman's Image

The image of the poet as a mystic is a powerful image in contemporary Iran for two reasons. Firstly, there is a long tradition of mystical poetry in Persian literature. After the thirteenth century, all Persian poetry, if not clearly and completely mystical in intent, is at least tinged with Sufism, and the language of mysticism appears to a Persian reader to be intrinsically poetic (Davis 2004). This intrinsic relation between mysticism and poetry continues to be present in contemporary Persian poetry.[2]

Secondly, the image of the poet as a mystic proves less harmful to the current political establishment (compared to *She'r-e Now*[3]) due to its indifference to immediate sociopolitical issues. In Persian literary and cultural history, poets depended upon the court as the source of power in the country and supported its policies. In the modern period, this strong link was severed. As the poets became independent from the court, they could express their genuine feelings

[2]Sohrab Sepehri (1928-1980), a contemporary Iranian poet, wrote mystical poetry in modern forms, exemplifying a poetic mysticism that goes beyond the Islamic tradition.

[3]Modern Persian poetry was developed by Nima Yushij (1897-1960), known as "the father of *She'r-e Now*," in the early decades of the twentieth century. It is Persian poetry liberated from the regular constraints of meter and comprised of poetic lines of unequal length. Unlike classical Persian poetry, its use of rhyme is keyed to the conclusion of a particular idea rather than as an ending to a fixed metric quantity.

toward the court and its politics. This oppositional position was reinforced in the Persian Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911) (Fomeshi, 2015: 244). In fact, the interlocking of literary and political discourses in modern Iran paved the way for an oppositional political stance. From its beginning, *She'r-e Now* was considered the poetry of "rebellion," "negation," "objection:" this new poetics also served as the "slogan" of those opposing the regime (Zarrinkoub 2009: 232). After the 1979 Revolution, having witnessed the revolutionary power of that kind of oppositional poetry, the establishment looked for an alternative poetry to decrease the influence of the oppositional poetry dominating the pre-1979 period. The post-1979 political system propagated the image of the poet, which it found less harmful. For obvious reasons, the cultural policy of the new system sidelined the image of the oppositional poet and preferred the image of poet as a mystic or a "laughing philosopher," a thinker who seeks satisfaction from within himself and is often indifferent to the immediate situation. The poetic discourse of the new political system and the image of an "apolitical poet" played a significant role in determining the image of Whitman in contemporary Iran.

Whitman, the father of American free verse and a global poet, was translated a few times in contemporary Iran. Although the popular anti-US, anti-West sentiments, which existed in pre-1979 Iran and became the state doctrine in the post-1979 political system, tried to decrease the American influence, interest in Whitman and his poetry has been increasing in post-1979 Iran. A close look at how Whitman's image is translated illustrates that the post-1979 poetic discourse, propagating the image of a poet as a mystic —which has a rich history in Persian poetic tradition— played a significant role in depicting an image of a Persian Whitman. The fact that Whitman on the front cover looks like a Persian mystic poet creates an association between Whitman and Persian poetry and contributes to a mystical image of the American poet in Iran.

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The photos used in this paper are from the following libraries and collections:
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Library of Congress
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U.S. National Archives

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Abstract:
Addressing Walt Whitman's reception in Iran, the present essay focuses on the front cover of a book-length translation of Whitman into Persian to study how Whitman's image is visually translated for an Iranian audience. Among literary discourses of contemporary Iran, the one that associates poetry with mysticism plays the most significant role in this translation.

Key Words: Reception Studies, Comparative Literature, Walt Whitman, Iran, Persian Poetry

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"ALGO EXTRAÑO EN ÉL”:
UN ESTUDIO DE UNA TRADUCCIÓN IRANÍ DE LA IMAGEN DE WHITMAN

Resumen:
Orientado a la recepción de Walt Whitman en Irán, el presente ensayo se centra en la portada de la traducción de un libro de Whitman al persa para estudiar cómo la imagen de dicho autor se traduce visualmente para el public iraní. Entre los discursos literarios del Irán contemporáneo, el que asocia la poesía con el misticismo juega el papel más importante en esta traducción.

Palabras clave: Estudios de Recepción, LiteraturaComparada, Walt Whitman, Poesíapersa.