

MULOSIGE Modules:
Re-Orienting Modernism: Mapping East-East Exchanges Between Arabic and
Persian Poetry

Reading List Description

Professor Levi Thompson argues for a new direction in comparative literary studies by analyzing close formal and thematic links between Arabic and Persian modernist poetry. In this reading list, he provides resources that help us not only to re-map the history of modernist poetic development between two Eastern traditions but also to argue for a re-orientation of modernist studies more broadly. We might name this re-orientation with an Arabic neologism: *i'ādat al-tashrīq*, that is, a “remaking” or a “return to being Eastern.”

Thompson takes a “planetary” approach to the growth of modernism inspired by Susan Stanford Friedman’s *Planetary Modernisms* (2015) as well as Aamir Mufti’s *Forget English!* (2016) and Itamar Even-Zohar’s theory of the literary polysystem. While accounting for the role Western modernism played in the changes Arab and Persian poets introduced to their respective projects, Thompson also gestures to readings that highlight foundational modernist innovations that occurred beyond the reach of Western influence. These innovations include the retention of several elements of premodern poetic form based in the Arabic prosodic tradition, such as the continued presence of the Arabic metrical foot (*taf‘īlah*) in both Arabic and Persian modernist poetry during the early decades of their growth. These metrical connections, in concert with appeals to Near Eastern mythic and religious traditions in both Arabic and Persian modernist poetries, constitute a significant instance of solidarity among literary traditions in the global south—a solidarity with political stakes extending to other marginalized literary traditions across the planet. Overall, Thompson draws our attention away from Europe as single or exemplary locus of modernism and redirect it toward another significant geography where a vibrant modernist network operated outside of the West.

This reading list developed out of a talk given at SOAS [“Re-Orienting Modernism: Mapping East-East Exchanges Between Arabic and Persian”](#) (SOAS, 29 May 2019).

Reading List contributor:

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Guided reading list (in five beats):

Overall, this reading list is intended to help us re-orient our conceptions about modernism. It plays on a reformulation of Horkheimer and Adorno's approach to myth and enlightenment. Namely, its thesis is: "The East is already modernist, and modernity reverts to the East."

Beat One: Starting in Europe to Move Beyond Europe

We begin in Europe so that we can quickly flip the script and begin seeking out modernist beginnings elsewhere. In the case of this reading list, that elsewhere is going to be the Middle East—specifically, the Arab world and Iran.

Readings

Jackson, Kevin. *Constellation of Genius: 1922: Modernism Year One*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012.

This book lays out the case for 1922 being the *key* moment in modernism, but Jackson only considers the Western context and Western authors. We are also going to take 1922 as a beginning point for modernism throughout the rest of this list. By starting with Europe, we can also explore what it was that made 1922 so important for modernism and what works appeared that year to lead Jackson to propose it as the start of modernism in the West. We are here thinking of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (all of which appeared in English that year).

Beat Two: Our Theoretical Base for Re-Orienting Modernism

In this second stage, we turn our attention to theoretical texts that will help us look beyond the West in our investigations of modernist beginnings. The texts are long, so you are free to peruse as needed beyond the introductory parts of each. Overall, we are considering transnational approaches to literature as well as "polysystem theory," which has a longer theoretical history than transnational approaches do. Readers may spend as much or as little time in this section as they like, depending on their need for a solid theoretical ground vs. their interests in textual analysis, which we will come to in the next sections. I also list here an article of mine that puts the theoretical practice outlined here to work in an analysis of the Iraqi poet 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī's use of the premodern Persian poet 'Umar al-Khayyām as a poetic mask.

Readings

Even-Zohar, Itamar. "Polysystem Theory." *Polysystem Studies*, [Poetics Today 11:1]. 1990.

Friedman, Susan Stanford. *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time*. Modernist Latitudes. Edited by Jessica Berman and Paul Saint-Amour. New York: Columbia UP, 2015.

Mahler, Sarah J. "Theoretical and Empirical Contributions toward a Research Agenda for Transnationalism." *Transnationalism from Below*. Edited by Michael Peter Smith and Luis Eduardo Guarzino. London: Transaction, 1998. 64-100.

Minor Transnationalism. Edited by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005.

Mufti, Aamir R. *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2016.

Thompson, Levi. "A Transnational Approach to 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī's 'Umar Khayyām.'" *Transnational Literature* 11.1 (2018): 1-14.
https://dspace.flinders.edu.au/xmlui/bitstream/handle/2328/38761/Thompson%20A_Transnational_Approach.pdf.

Beat Three: [State Modernity Versus Poetic Modernity \(in Iran\)](#)

With our theoretical base now established, we move on to two significant events in Iran that occurred in 1922 to start thinking about modernity and modernism *outside of* the West. This section includes readings about the nascent project of Iranian statecraft and creation of national heritage along with a contemporary poetic project's resistance to state-sponsored modernity. We therefore turn our attention to the "founder" of Persian poetic modernism, Nīmā Yūshīj, and examine how he goes about constructing his own idea of a modern subject in light of Michel Foucault's comments about an "attitude of modernity" in "What Is Enlightenment?"

Readings

Essays on Nima Yushij: Animating Modernism in Persian Poetry. Edited by Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak and Kamran Talattof. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2004.

Foucault, Michel. "What is Enlightenment?" ("Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?"). Translated by Catherine Porter. *The Foucault Reader*. Edited by Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984: 32-50.

Grigor, Talinn. *Building Iran: Modernism, Architecture, and National Heritage under the Pahlavi Monarchs*. New York: Periscope Publishing, Ltd., 2009.

Grigor, Talinn. "Recultivating 'Good Taste': The Early Pahlavi Modernists and Their Society for National Heritage." *Iranian Studies* 37.1 (2004): 17-45.

"Poems by Nima Yushij." ["The Swan" (1926), "The Phoenix" (1938), "The Raven" (1938), "The Bird of Grief" (1938).] Translated by Levi Thompson. *Inventory*, Princeton (Winter 2017): 66-74.

Readers of Persian are encouraged to look at Nīmā's original poems in:

Yūshīj, Nīmā. *Majmu'ah-i kāmil-i ash'ār-i Nimā Yushij: Fārsī va Ṭabarī*. Tihārān: Intishārāt-i Nigāh, 1370 [1991].

Beat Four: [Form Across Contexts: The 'Arūd in Persian and Arabic](#)

We now turn our attention to the profound interconnection of Arabic and Persian modernist poetries in terms of poetic form, the Arabic *'arūd* ("science of prosody") to be specific. The readings here address the ways in which Arab and Persian modernists *sublate*—"abolish," but also "transcend" and "preserve"—the past in their modernist poetry with certain rhetorical devices. To limit our investigations, we focus on just two: *mu'āraḍah* contrafaction and *taḍmīn* "quoting." While we continue to work with Nīmā's poetry from the previous section, we also here add the work of 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī. (I lay out the specifics of our approach to

their works in the associated lecture.) A full appreciation of this section for someone studying on their own requires knowledge of either Arabic or Persian at an advanced level (>3 years of study, and perhaps >4 years in some cases).

Readings

Al-Bayati, Abdul Wahab. *Love, Death and Exile: Poems Translated from the Arabic*. Translated by Bassam K. Frangieh. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990.

Gelder, G.J.H. van. "Taḍmīn." *Encyclopaedia of Islam. Second Edition*.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_7284.

Losensky, Paul. "'The Allusive Field of Drunkenness': Three Safavid-Moghul Responses to a Lyric by Bābā Fighānī." *Reorientations/Arabic and Persian Poetry*. Edited by Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1994. 227-262.

Schippers, A. "Mu'āraḍa." *Encyclopaedia of Islam. Second Edition*.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_5276.

Readers of Arabic should consult al-Bayātī's originals in:

Al-Bayātī, 'Abd al-Wahhāb. *Al-A'māl al-shi'riyyah*. 2 Vols. Bayrūt: al-Mu'assasah al-'Arabiyyah li-l-Dirāsāt wa-l-Nashr, 1995.

Beat Five: [Content Across Contexts: Al-Ḥallāj as a Case Study](#)

Finally, we look to an instance of content shared across Arabic and Persian poetic modernisms, the myth surrounding the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn ibn Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj. Al-Ḥallāj was put to death by the Abbasid Caliphate in 922 CE, which means the one thousand year anniversary of his death was 1922, our key year from before. Here, we read about the stories of his martyrdom as they have been transmitted to us over the centuries and consider how Arab and Persian modernists like al-Bayātī and Nīmā have integrated these stories into their poetry (continuing our engagements with their poetry from the previous sections). We also acknowledge the importance of al-Ḥallāj's myth within a Western context with the monumental work of famed Orientalist Louis Massignon, which brings us full circle and back to Europe. By this point, we have (hopefully) seen how modernism does not necessarily come just from the West but instead has other beginnings in different *significant geographies*.

Readings

Ḥallāj, al-Ḥusayn ibn Manṣūr. *Hallaj: Poems of a Sufi Martyr*. Translated by Carl W. Ernst. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2018.

Massignon, Louis. *The passion of al-Hallāj: mystic and martyr of Islam*. Foreword and translation by Herbert Mason. 4 Volumes. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1982.

Mojaddedi, Jawid. "Ḥallāj." *Encyclopædia Iranica*. XI/6. 589-592.
<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hallaj-1>.

*MULOSIGE Modules seeks to foster research and pedagogy that highlights comparison across and between languages and that is attentive to the 'significant geographies' of each context. Readers can create and submit syllabi based on their own collaborations with other scholars at