

DEMOCRATIC POETICS

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE US AND IRAN

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Abstract

Walt Whitman (1819–1892), the father of American free verse, and Nima Yushij (1897–1960), the father of Persian New Poetry, each played a central role in his respective poetic tradition. Whitman's free verse and Yushij's New Poetry are the results of translating the discourse of democracy to a literary discourse. In this way, there are multiple points of comparison between these poets' corresponding approaches to poetic theory, practice, and context. The purpose of the present study is to unravel the relationship between sociopolitical situations in Whitman's and Yushij's societies and examine the resulting literary changes. Analysis of the points of similarity and difference in each poet's sociopolitical context and the literary development of their respective nations will lead to a deeper understanding of the general laws of literary development, whilst simultaneously highlighting the historical peculiarity of each national literature, the uniqueness of each sociopolitical context, and the individuality of each author.

Keywords

American Free Verse, Comparative Poetics, Persian New Poetry, Nima Yushij, Walt Whitman

About the author

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INTRODUCTION

Walt Whitman (1819–1892), the father of American free verse, and Nima Yushij (1897–1960), the father of *She'r-e Now* (modern Persian poetry), each played a central role in his respective poetic tradition. Whitman was one of the most influential poets of American literature; according to Donald Pease, “American poetry may be read as a series of reactions to Whitman” (148). Yushij has the same status in Persian poetry, where every poet following him defines themselves according to their relation to this central figure. This role is manifested in the title of the book, *To Butterflies and Why Am I not a Nimaic Poet* (1995) by Reza Baraheni (b. 1935), a contemporary poet and critic, who defines himself in opposition to this central figure (Fomeshi, “Nimâ Yushij”). Both Whitman and Yushij lived during a significant period in the history of their countries, and their poetic innovations contributed significantly to the development of poetry within their respective nations. Along with their poetry, their sociopolitical situations had some commonalities. Although both countries’ movement towards democracy has been (and largely still is) problematic, Whitman’s free verse and Yushij’s New Poetry represent the transformation of the discourse of democracy into a literary discourse. In this way, there are multiple points of comparison between these poets’ corresponding approaches to poetic theory, practice, and context.

Although different works have studied the affinity between mysticism in Whitman’s writing and Persian Sufism (Ahmadsoltani; Farzan; Fayez; Frabizio; Furlanetto; Khosla; LeMaster&Jahan), no such works have yet laid emphasis on the similarities between the sociopolitical context of Whitman’s America and that of (post-)constitutional Iran.¹ Furthermore, the very point that there is no mutual influence between the two poets makes the comparison between Whitman’s and Yushij’s poetic innovation more interesting. Whitman, who passed away five years before Yushij was born, was not influenced by Yushij. Yushij was familiar with Whitman as he elaborated on his poetry and context in *Arzesh-e Ehsasat*. However, according to Fomeshi (*The Persian Whitman*), this indicates Yushij’s critical reading of Whitman’s poetry and context, rather than any kind of literary influence. Analyzing the points of similarity and difference between Whitman’s and Yushij’s sociopolitical contexts and in the development of their respective poetic traditions will lead to a deeper understanding of the historical peculiarity of each national literature, the uniqueness of each sociopolitical context and the individuality of each poet.

COMPARABLE CONTEXTS AND DISCOURSES

The sociopolitical context of nineteenth-century America and that of (post-) constitutional Iran are comparable in that democracy was a dominant discourse in both societies. With the American Revolution (1765–1783), the US turned from monarchy toward a democratic political system, and democracy turned into a dominant discourse of the era. That turning point started the new nation's gradual movement toward its democratic situation. However, the path to democracy was plagued by many problems, culminating in the 1850s, a period of “unprecedented corruption on all levels of state and national government” (Reynolds, “Walt Whitman, 1819–1892: A Brief Biography” 26). The slavery crisis, political corruption, the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the failed Presidencies of Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan, increasing economic hardship, and the capture of fugitive slave Anthony Burns overshadowed the era. Exasperated by the turmoil resulting from these events, Whitman's belief in the ability of the party system to improve the situation was tested. However, his firm belief in the power of democracy turned him from formal politics to poetry. “Indeed, so intense were Whitman's political sentiments that a few critics speculate that his turn to the more distant environs of visionary poetry in 1855 reflected some deep disillusionment with real-world politics as a vehicle of social change” (Mack 136). Disillusioned by Democratic Party politics, he tried to restore “his faith by focusing on American democratic culture” (Warren, “Style” 381). To Whitman, the crisis of the 1850s could be resolved not by formal political actions and institutions such as superficial suffrage, presidency, the Congress, and legislation, but by some cultural and literary measures. It was in such a context of political failure of the presidents that he “felt impelled to run for his own office of poet” (Wolosky 373). He responded to the chaos of the antebellum years through his decision to help the nation as a *poet*. Democracy, manifested in poetry, was his response to the political issues of the country.

Iran too was moving in a democratic direction. The constitutionalist project aimed to recast Iranian political culture in the modern democratic tradition. To do so, the existing political institutions and processes had to be democratized. The period between Iranian society's introduction to the modern West and the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–11 is known as *Asr-e-Bidari* (Period of Awakening) in modern Iranian history (Mirsepassi 56). The communication with the West—through travel, translations, and educational establishments—contributed to the formation of modern concepts, ambitions, beliefs, and values. As a result a modern intelligentsia arose, which viewed constitutionalism, secularism, and nationalism as the three necessary means to achieve a modern and developed Iran (Abrahamian 62). These Western-inspired concepts, espoused by the new intelligentsia, along with the “antistate Shiá ideas of the traditional middle class contributed to the eventual triumph” of the democratic movement (i.e., the

Constitutional Revolution in 1905–1911). On 5 August 1906 Muzaffar al-Din Shah Qajar signed the royal proclamation to hold nationwide elections for a Constituent Assembly, and the Shah opened the inaugural session of Parliament on 19 August 1906.

With the death of Muzaffar-Din Shah four days after signing the decree of the constitution, a new period of struggle and unrest began under Muhammad Ali Shah.² The domestic problems intensified with World War 1, leading to a turning point in the history of modern Iran: the Prime Minister Zia al-Din Tabatabaee (1888–1969) carried out a program in which the old government was overthrown on the night of 21 February 1921. Less than twenty years after the victory of Iranian struggle to democratize the country, a parliament was elected that recognized Reza Shah as the first member of a new hereditary imperial dynasty, the Pahlavi, on 13 December 1925 (Fomeshi, *The Persian Whitman* 62). While the “Constitutional Revolution was virtually at an end by 1911,” “its dynamics continued to influence Iranian society up to the 1921 coup d’etat, and even beyond” (Soroudi⁴), as the case of Yushij indicates. He was strongly influenced by the sociopolitical context of post-constitutional Iran, including being preoccupied with Mirza Kuchak Khan (1880–1921), a revolutionary leader and the president of the Persian Socialist Soviet Republic, and his political activities. But when Mirza’s movement was brought to an end in 1921, Yushij turned more seriously towards poetry. The dynamics of Constitutional Revolution influenced Yushij even after the defeat of Mirza’s revolution and his death. Not unlike Whitman, the Persian poet turned to poetry as a response to failure of political actions.

A point worth mentioning is the interconnectedness of the discourse of democracy with other dominant discourses in the two countries. In the United States, from the revolutionary era to the culmination of Whitman’s poetic career, nationalism and democracy were the dominant discourses of the country and as Paine’s *Common Sense* indicates, the two discourses were interconnected. When *Common Sense* appeared anonymously on 10 January 1776, it became the central literary document in the nationalistic movement of the country. It advocated for independence from Britain and heartened the colonists to fight for separation. *Common Sense* not only contributed significantly to the process of American independence, but also played an important role in the political history of the country. Advocating for the formation of a democratic republic was a major aim of the pamphlet, and the arguments to support independence from Britain were also centered on democracy. “This seminal polemic was a fiery and effective condemnation of kings and aristocracy that took the American polity by storm” (Fredriksen 375). Instead of monarchy, it proposed a republic with a representative democracy. *Common Sense*, providing an inspiring argument in favor of both

nationalism and democracy, indicates the interconnectedness of the two dominant discourses at a significant point in the history of the nation.

Democracy in Iran has a different story. The modern intelligentsia believed that human progress was easily attainable if “they broke the three chains of royal despotism, clerical dogmatism, and foreign imperialism” (Abrahamian 61). They loathed the first as “the inevitable enemy of liberty, equality and fraternity; the second as the natural opponent of rational and scientific thought; and the third as the insatiable exploiter of small countries such as Iran” (61). The new group viewed constitutionalism, secularism, and nationalism as the three necessary means to achieve a modern and developed Iran. They believed constitutionalism would eliminate the despotism of monarchy; secularism, the influence of clergy; and nationalism, the imperialists’ exploitation (62). To Abdol Rahim Talebov (1834–1911), a member of that new group, nationalism and democracy were interwoven. He was a leading figure of Iranian nationalism. Several of his works, such as *Masael al-Hayat* or *Azadi Che Chizast* dealt with political subjects, social romanticism, and nationalism (Tabibzadeh 43). From the emergence of a modern intelligentsia to Reza Shah’s rise to power, nationalism and democracy were interconnected. However, with Reza Shah’s dictatorship a new trend began. He came to power not through a democratic process, but with the 1921 coup d’etat. He destroyed the achievement of the constitutional movement; he turned constitutional government to despotism and dictatorship. He treated his critics harshly and suppressed the activity of political parties. “The father of modern Iran” severed the link between Iranian nationalism and democracy.

DEVELOPING DEMOCRATIC POETICS

There is a long history of theorizing the relationship between aesthetic and civic upheaval. It can be traced back to the ancient Greeks, where Plato excluded poets from his ideal republic because he feared that their art would endanger the peace of the state. Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), an Italian political philosopher, rhetorician, and historian, situated poetry in a complex dialectical relation with political organization. To him, free poetic forms were a product of modern societies. According to Victor Hugo, a literary revolution is the most decisive consequence of a political revolution. This idea holds true for the American Revolution and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution.

American free verse, whose best-known writer is Whitman, was deeply rooted in political aspirations. The literary innovation of Whitman should be analyzed in the light of its sociopolitical context. As previously discussed, Whitman’s

disappointment with the political institutions of the 1850s shifted his focus from politics to poetry. Whitman did not consider democracy merely as a political phenomenon, but as a cultural weapon necessary for the material and spiritual development of the individual, and the society. It is not surprising that his poetry evolved around democracy, as will be discussed shortly. Whitman's free verse was a development of the earlier theoretical and practical attempts to democratize literature, including those by Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859).³ The new nation needed a new poetry that would be an artistic manifestation of American democracy. Whitman appreciated the sociopolitical context of his country and tried to translate democracy into poetics. To the poet of democracy, "democracy can never prove itself beyond cavil, until it founds and luxuriantly grows its own forms of art, poems . . ." (*The Portable Walt Whitman* 398). Whitman brought the social and political conscience of his country to American poetry and created a democratic art through his *Leaves of Grass*.

Looking at Whitman's poetic innovations in light of his commitment to democracy can significantly contribute to our appreciation of the poet. What he does with his poetry is closely related to his idea of democracy. For instance, he uses three techniques in his long lines of free verse: syntactic parallelism, repetition, and cataloging. If equality is integral to democracy, then to Whitman the poet is the equalizer. He "tends to write in sequences of coordinate clauses, from two to four lines long, based on the parallels between syntactic units within the lines" (Warren "Style" 383). His political ideas can be traced to the syntax of his poetry, where "balanced parallelism becomes a political metaphor of equality" (Portelli 92). He also repeats words in his poetry. This repetition includes "anaphora, the repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of lines; epistrophe, the repetition of the same word or phrase at the end of lines; or symploce, the repetition of both initial and terminal words or phrases" (383).

Cataloging, Whitman's most recognizable and memorable formal feature, is the expansion of the two other techniques to build a rhythm. A catalog includes different types of people, situations, or objects. The poet's idea of his catalogs is illuminating:

Oh God! how tired I get of hearing that said about the "catalogs!" I resolved at the start to diagnose, state, the case of the mechanics, laborers, artisans, of America—to get into the stream with them—give them a voice in literature: not an echoed voice—no: their own voice—that which they had never had before. I meant to do this naturally, however— not with apologies—not to lug them in by the neck and heels, in season and out of season, where they did belong and where they didn't belong—but to welcome them to their legitimately superior place—to give them entrance and lodgement by all

fair means. Maybe I have failed, maybe I have succeeded—but whatever, my intention has always remained clear, unshakeable. (*With Walt Whitman in Camden*: 142–43)

Whitman's democracy needed a democratic form. He uses the catalog, a structure that is not logical or progressive, but pluralistic. His catalogs make his poetry anti-hierarchical. The items in a catalog "cohere through his affirmations of inclusiveness" (MacGowan 290). Whitman's catalogs "overtly attest to his interest in visually depicting the country" (Blake 82). He "also found the catalog a device that allowed him to work with the vast size and scope of American life and American geography" (Casale 53).

Whitman's treatment of language also indicates his democratic ideas. Once he told Traubel, "The subject of language interests me—interests me: I never quite get it out of my mind. I sometimes think the *Leaves* is only a language experiment" (*Daybooks and Notebooks* 729). He believed "the new world, the new times, the new peoples" called for a new language to express their newness (361). He borrowed words "for expressive effect, to mark a poetic difference in the subject he treat[ed]" (Warren, *Walt Whitman's Language Experiment* 48). *Amie* is one example. It is the feminine form of the French word for "friend," but Whitman used it to refer to male friends. In fact, it was an attempt to "spiritualize the language and its users," and "to project a new social relation between men" in American society (49). He also borrowed words from new technologies. Whitman did not limit his poetry to learned sources and books; he referred to street language and daily life as its linguistic source. He tried to invigorate American English and poetry through "the rich flashes of humor and genius and poetry—darting out often from a gang of laborers, railroad-men, miners, drivers, or boatmen!" (Hoffman 369). He preferred "the ordinary language of American conversation with a strong mix of foreign terms, colloquialisms, place names, technical terms, slang, and new words he creates himself with innovative uses of prefixes and endings" (Killingsworth 27). He strongly believed in slang as "the start of fancy, imagination and humor" (Hoffman 369). Whitman's use of slang, like his use of catalog, is democratic. "His use of American vernacular complements his use of catalogs to present the thematic content of his poems" (Casale 39). The language of *Leaves* is highly democratic; the poet does not restrict it to any single dialect or register.

Whitman's persona in "Song of Myself" has challenged many critics and continues to resist classification. He is too large to be classified. In fact, Whitman's is among the most democratic personas in literature. Whitman's all-inclusive poetic persona in "Song of Myself" brings the whole of America under one poetic roof. "He took upon himself the messianic task of absorbing his nation, with the expectation that in turn it would absorb his poetry and be healed by its triumphant proclamation of democratic togetherness and toleration" (Reynolds, *Walt Whitman: Lives*

and Legacies 11). The persona Whitman creates in “Song of Myself” is expansive, democratic, fluid, inclusive, nondiscriminatory, and changing; it represents all Americans. As a result, there is “a peculiar kind of impersonality attached to” Whitman (Bennett 142). His “poetical loss of self” or “impersonality” is thus “the most democratic moment of self,” and indicates his democratic individuality. This is best represented by his line “I contain multitudes” (Wihl 79). The “I” in “Song of Myself” “emerged as a composite and adhesive rather than exclusive identity” (Pease 151). In this way, Whitman can be viewed as “the most unegotistical of writers”; he consciously tries “to abnegate and anonymize identity” (Herrington 123). The “I” in “Song of Myself” moves beyond the experiences of Whitman’s persona to include everything without discrimination, standing as a prime example of the inclusivity of Whitman’s poetry.

Furthermore, Whitman’s democratic vision extended to the body as a site of equality. Whitman broke the nineteenth-century taboos against writing about the body. While the body belonged to the unmentionable topics of respected communities within Puritan and Victorian morality, he spoke about it with honesty and openness. His poetry depicts the “body as a locus of democratic energies” (Erkkila177). He was the poet of equality; that was why he turned into “the prophet of the body” (Railton 15). The body was integral to his idea of equality; all humans live in bodies and the body is equal and common to everybody. “His emphasis on the body and on sensuality grows out of his belief that such an appeal to physical experience breaks down hierarchies and discriminations among his readers” (Folsom and Price 48–49). He was democratic concerning his treatment of the body: “Whoever you are, how superb and how divine is your body or any part of it!” (“Starting from Paumanok” section 13); “If I worship one thing more than other, it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part of it” (“Song of Myself” section 24); “The love of the body of man or woman balks account, the body itself balks account, That of the male is perfect, and that of the female is perfect” (“I Sing the Body Electric” section 2); “The man’s body is sacred and the woman’s body is sacred” (“I Sing the Body Electric” section 6); and “If any thing is sacred, the human body is sacred” (“I Sing the Body Electric” section 8).

For Whitman’s Persian counterpart, a change in Persian poetry was a necessity. In Yushij’s theoretical works the point that most preoccupies him is the influence of historical changes on the formation of artistic movements. He was well aware of the reasons behind the emergence of New Poetry and tried to explain it in some of his theoretical works, including *Arzesh-e Ehsasat* (*The Value of Feelings* 1939–1940) and *Harf-haye Hamsayeh* (*The Neighbour Says*). Considering the sociopolitical context the soil out of which poetry emerges, Yushij wrote “Adroit artists are true and careful representatives of specific historical moments; they are watches working accurately and in an orderly way” (Yushij, *Arzesh-e Ehsasat* 32).

He grasped the democratic endeavor of Iranian society and injected its spirit into Persian poetry. He asserted “change in the form of social life” led to change in the works of art produced (36). Yushij believed that if a work of art was not influenced by the sociopolitical situation of its society, it would not be original (18–19). This statement is reminiscent of Whitman’s aspirations in *Democratic Vistas* for a new poetry as an expression of American democracy. Yushij’s strong belief in the relation between historical situation and poetry accelerated more profound changes in Persian poetry. As Constitutional Revolution opposed despotism, New Poetry advocated democracy. Although constitutionalism failed with Reza Shah, the democratic idea of the Constitutional Revolution remained at work in Yushij’s poetry.

Yushij’s idea of poetry motivated him to break through the constraints of poetic tradition and conventions. One of his contributions to poetic modernity was to subvert traditional modes of poetic expression and to create his own original poetic diction. While the poets well-versed in classical poetry believed that the vocabulary of poetry was limited to certain words, Yushij believed that any word may be employed in poetry as long as it contributed to the harmony of the poem. Like his American counterpart, he also used colloquial words to enrich poetic diction. He was aware that such words might lead to a prosaic poetry. Therefore, he coined words and phrases and also turned to some archaic terms to save poetry from entering into the realm of prose. This new combination makes his diction unique. His poetry represents his innovation with verbs, some of which he invented. He also revived verbs that were seldom used in traditional poetic diction.

Yushij’s localism was another of his contributions to poetic diction. He was the forerunner of creating local color in modern Persian poetry. While traditional poets looked back to established poetic heritage to write poetry, he relied upon his own lived experience. His poem, “Kar-e Shabpa” (Night Watchman’s Job) highlighted “a quality hitherto nonexistent in canonical Persian poetry: lexical and syntactic localisms” (Karimi-Hakkak 277). Terms such as *ouja* (elm), *tireng* (wild pheasant), *ayesh* (paddy), *binjegar* (farmer) and *kaleh si* (clay oven) came from Tabari, language spoken in the poet’s native region. Yushij entered a local word with its entire connotations and associations in the context of a poem. His use of local speech in his poems expanded the vocabulary of Persian poetry and included non-Persian words in the poetic tradition.

Yushij also experimented with the form of Persian poetry. Since almost the beginning of Persian poetry, rhyme was a central characteristic. Gradually it lost its function and turned into a mechanical feature of poetry. Classical Persian poetry was based on *bayt* (distich) and rhyme formed an integral part of each *bayt*. However, in Nimaic Poetry⁴ there is no conventional *bayt* as the fundamental unit

of poetry.⁵ To Yushij, rhyme was a musical element to connect related ideas, rather than conventional *bayts*, in a poem. His formal innovations cover meter as well, which will be discussed in the following section.

Aware of thematic and formal affinities between the two modern poets, Persian readers tend to look at Whitman through Yushij or the other way around.⁶ How did the association between Yushij and Whitman form? In October and November 1943 translations of two of Whitman's poems, along with an introduction to the poet, were published in *Sukhan*, Iran's leading literary journal. This was only the second Persian translation of Whitman and the first to be accompanied by an introduction (Fomeshi, *The Persian Whitman* 116). Ehsan Tabari (1917–1980), a leftist thinker, in the introduction highlighted Whitman's innovations in the form of poetry and his avoidance of rhyme and meter. On 9 May 1943, a few months before Tabari published the introduction to Whitman, he published a poem by Yushij in *Nameh-ye Mardom*, the leftist monthly he edited (117). In the introduction to that poem, Tabari explained the difference between Yushij's poetics and traditional Persian poetics. Many of Yushij's critics evaluated his poetry according to the norms of traditional poetry. Tabari's attempt to distinguish between the two poetics was a significant contribution to promoting Yushij's works. Tabari also promoted Yushij at one of the most significant literary events of twentieth-century Iran, the first Iranian Writers' Congress in 1946. At the Congress Yushij expressed his ideas and recited his poetry (119). The distinguished literati of the time, mostly suspicious of poetic "revolution," expressed their hatred and animosity toward Yushij. Dissatisfied with the speakers' ignorance of Persian literary modernism, Tabari supported Yushij. Tabari's justification of Yushij's poetic innovations at the Congress was a timely contribution to Yushij's reputation among the established literary figures.

At its conclusion, the Congress drafted a resolution which considered the duty of literature "to guide and educate the people and hoped that the writers would support *true* democracy, philanthropy, peace, justice, freedom and knowledge and they would fight superstition and Fascism." Furthermore, it "wished for increasing cultural and literary relationships between Iran and all the progressive democracies in the world . . .to contribute to world peace" (Fomeshi, *The Persian Whitman* 124). Starting with the early 1940s, the literary activities of the Tudeh Party of Iran, a major leftist party, not only contributed to creating leftist literature, but also provided a leftist interpretation of almost all existing literature—including medieval Persian literature.

There was an association between oppositional stance and poetic modernism in general and New Poetry in particular. New Poetry from the beginning was considered the poetry of "rebellion," "negation," "objection" and the "slogan" of those

opposing the regime (Zarrinkub 232). In Yushij's poetry "the major components of poetics and politics were so completely fused that it would be impossible to find someone with a progressive politics who did not like Nīmā's verse, or conversely a political conservative who did" (Dabashi and Dahdel 94). Yushij's oppositional political stance can be traced in his poetry.⁷ The Tudeh Party realized, reinforced, and took advantage of this association and approached the intellectuals and innovative artists and writers. The party was willing to use Yushij to further its cause, and it contributed greatly to Yushij's widespread popularity (Eslami 91). The interaction contributed not only to the popularity of the poet, but also to a leftist interpretation of New Poetry (Fomeshi, *The Persian Whitman*).

In the same period "a translation effort was spearheaded by the Party, through which leftist ideas began to gain currency in Iran" (123). The Iranian Left, the Tudeh Party in particular, shaped translation practices in this period and translation came to be known as a political strategy. The same leftist discourse was at work in the interpretation of Whitman in Iran. A leftist periodical, *Nameh-ye Mardom*, published three poems by Yushij. It also published "Az Gahvarih-i keh Peyvaste Mijonbid," Tabari's translation of Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." The front cover of the issue which published Tabari's translation of Whitman's poem has particular significance. On the front cover of the issue there was an image of Taqi Arani (1902–1940), an Iranian leftist intellectual,⁸ whom the Tudeh Party took as their "spiritual leader" (127). Arani's image on the front cover of the journal that published Yushij's poetry and translation of Whitman's poetry is an example of "the outermost peritext" (Genette 16) that contributed to a leftist interpretation of Yushij and Whitman.

Two major leftist thinkers, Tabari and Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–1969), were among the early supporters of Yushij and his poetic modernism (Fomeshi, *The Persian Whitman* 128). According to Tabari, Yushij revolutionized the form and content of Persian poetry and opened a new chapter in the history of Persian literature. His "personality was a combination of that of Victor Hugo who conquered the fortress of rhymes and that of Vladimir Mayakovsky who put poetry at the service of the revolutionary class" (Khosravi 114). To Al-e Ahmad, "to defend Nima is to defend revolutionary poetry" (116). In such contexts the "revolution" signified not only the revolution in the form of poetry—including innovations in rhyme and meter—but also the revolution in the content of poetry which was ideally leftist. All these comments supporting Yushij contributed to reading him and other progressive poets, including Whitman, in the light of leftist ideology.

The sociopolitical contexts of nineteenth-century America and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution irreversibly shaped their respective poetics. Whitman and Yushij consciously reconceptualized poetry in relation to sociopolitical

processes and developed literary theory centered upon democracy. The democratic context of America led to the emergence of Whitman's free verse; the discourse of democracy in Iran contributed to the development of *She'r-e Azad* (Free Poetry);⁹ and the literary activities of the Iranian Left, particularly those of Tabari created an association between the two poets (Fomeshi, *The Persian Whitman* 12).

CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES

Nineteenth-century America and (post-)constitutional Iran have some points of similarity and difference; as do the poetry and poetics of Whitman and those of Yushij. To begin with the points of similarity, the discourse of democracy in each country contributed to the development of a poetry that was democratic in content and form. The next point of similarity is that in both societies something outside the literary world (i.e., the failed politics in the 1850s US and the failed Persian constitutional movement) turned the poets' attention toward poetry.

The difference in the history of innovations in rhyme and meter in the two poetic traditions led to a difference between American free verse and Persian New Poetry. New Poetry could not completely eliminate the traditional metrics of Persian poetry. A noticeable first distinction between traditional Persian poetry and New Poetry is that the latter does not conform to the traditional rules of rhyme, meter, and length of lines. Form was an important—probably the most important—aspect of traditional Persian poetry.¹⁰ Therefore, any experimentation with rhyme would turn poetry into non-poetry. Yushij realized the importance of form to Persian poetry. Regarding form, he wrote three kinds of poetry: traditional, semi-traditional, and New Poetry. The innovative poet acted strategically; “Ghorab” (the crow) and “Qoqnus” (the Phoenix), the first instances of New Poetry, were published almost two decades after “Afsaneh,” an early instance of Yushij's semi-traditional poetry. The publication of “Ghorab” and “Qoqnus” indicated a movement away from the equal number of *arkan* and regular pattern of the rhyme. Throughout the history of Persian poetry, each and every line of a given poem had the same number of feet. It was the reason behind the parallel shape of Persian poetry. It was a universal rule of Persian poetry; Yushij changed it. Nimaic meter (i.e., meter named after Nima Yushij) follows traditional *aruz*. Like classical Persian poetry, New Poetry employs only one metric pattern in each individual poem, but the number of the *arkan* is different in various lines. New Poetry was not a total break with the formal tradition of Persian poetry; this contributed to its reception by the Persian-speaking audience who were used to traditional poetry. The task of releasing Persian poetry entirely free of a traditional metric system was placed upon the shoulders of Ahmad Shamlu (1925–2000) and his *She'r-e Sepid*.

In American poetry the situation was different. The systematic innovation in rhyme of English poetry can be traced back to the Renaissance. Unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter (blank verse) were first used (c.1540) by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey. He “probably took the idea from the *versi sciolti* (‘freed verse’) of Molza’s Italian translations of the *Aeneid* (1539)” (Cuddon 89). Blank verse “was almost certainly first used for a play by Sackville and Norton in *Gorboduc* (1561), and then became the standard verse for later Tudor and Jacobean dramatists who made it a most subtle and flexible instrument” (89). Unrhymed iambic pentameter shortly turned into the standard meter for dramatic poetry. “Much of the finest verse in English, particularly Shakespeare’s dramas have been written in blank verse. It also became a broadly used form for reflective, narrative and meditative poetry” (Baldick 28). It was used notably by Milton in *Paradise Lost* (1667) (Cuddon 90). All the poets of the Romantic period, particularly Wordsworth and Coleridge, wrote blank verse extensively (90). In America, blank verse was also praised. Jefferson in *Thoughts on English Prosody* (written around 1789) celebrated blank verse for its lack of rhyme. Jefferson rejected rhyme as a violation on the poet’s liberty. Bryant’s “On Trisyllabic Feet in Iambic Measure” (an essay published in 1819) admired blank verse and called for greater freedom of poets in metrical innovations. One innovation Bryant proposed was feet of three syllables in poems of iambic measure. Emerson followed the same principles. He experimented with different meters and poetic forms. His works range from poems in rhymed stanzas to blank verse and poems with irregular lines. He used tetrameter, trimeter, dimeter, and monometer in a single poem. His works had lines of varying lengths. He subverted many strict rules of prosody to create a democratic poetic form. Whitman was the culminating point of this process. He developed free verse, a kind of poetry that has been liberated from the regular constraints of meter. The length of its lines is unequal, and its use of rhyme irregular. It is “aptly named in that it offers the poet the freedom to choose a unique rhythm for each poem” (Quinn 174). “Instead of a regular metrical pattern it uses more flexible cadences or rhythmic groupings, sometimes supported by anaphora and other devices of repetition” (Baldick 102). Yet, free verse is never entirely free. Since it is shaped by the rhythms of speech, it can be defined in terms of traditional metrical feet. “The difference is that, while traditional verse follows a predictable pattern (so that iambic pentameter consists mostly of iambs, for example), free verse may juxtapose any kind of foot with any other” (Mikics 127). Although free verse “has precedents in translations of the biblical Psalms and in some poems of Blake and Goethe” (Baldick 102), the great pioneer of the form was Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* (1855) constituted a “Free Verse manifesto.” It has sometimes been perceived as “a revolutionary achievement” (Mikics 127). In fact, its development was more of an evolution; it was the logical outcome of the previous innovations in the realm of rhyme and meter. The long history of innovation with rhyme and meter in poetry written in English made it possible for free verse to release poetry from the shackles of rhyme and meter. Due

to the lack of such a history in Persian poetic tradition, the same process was not possible for New Poetry.

Although both poets developed democratic poetry, each considered the sociopolitical peculiarities of his country. Whitman's poetry tended toward realism while Yushij's poetry, after the rise of Reza Shah, turned to symbolism. The reason behind that difference has something to do with the difference in the sociopolitical context of the two societies. Nineteenth-century America was a former colony released from the British monarchy; it was a democracy ruled by the president and congress in place of a king. Whitman was almost entirely free of political censorship. Therefore, he could write in a realistic mode without the fear of state censorship. The sociopolitical context of nineteenth-century America required realism in literature. Through depiction of equality, body, and the common man, and the use of catalogs and diction, Whitman turned into the realist democratic poet of America. His democratic realism was photography achieved through words. Whitman's preference for photography over painting would describe his realism. He liked the inclusive and nondiscriminatory nature of photography better than the exclusive nature of painting. The poem "Pictures" "stresses the democratic inclusiveness of photography, its capturing of all in its field in opposition to the selectivity of painting" (Price 39). Whitman compared photography to poetry; both were "key elements of an emerging democratic art, an art that would level experience, break down hierarchies, undermine discrimination, and foster equality" (Folsom 275). Whatever was on the lens was recorded on the photograph. It was not exclusive. He stated: "I find I like the photographs better than the oils—they are perhaps mechanical, but they are honest. The artists add and deduct: the artists fool with nature—reform it, revise it, to make it fit their preconceived notion of what it should be" (*With Walt Whitman in Camden*:131). While some criticized photography because of its inclusiveness which led to the creation of a cluttered image of the world, Whitman fell in love with photography for the same reason. "Photographs were originally known as 'sun-paintings' because the sun as a painter did not discriminate and choose what it would illuminate but instead shone on everything and brought previously overlooked details to light" (Folsom 275). Whitman's *Leaves* was his sun-painting; he tried to depict whatever he saw:

Fullness of diversity became Whitman's idea of democratic beauty, and the photograph, with its sensitive plate that absorbed the impression of every detail that formed a scene, became the model for Whitman's absorptive lines, his flowing catalogues that sought to accumulate details toward a diverse unity, excluding nothing, gathering up a grand democratic clutter. (275)

He was highly interested in the qualities of photography as a democratic art. It is no surprise that “the growing appreciation of Whitman’s inclusive poetics corresponded to the increasing acceptance of photography as art” (279). “The writer who could achieve that realism could also be described as the creator of a truly democratic, essentially American art that captured the importance and the meaning of the commonplace” (Gray 130). His realist poetics, beginning with the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, led American poetry into a more democratic direction.

Yushij believed in the changing nature of sociopolitical context. His poetry changed according to the context. Yushij’s poetic development can be divided into three periods, respectively romantic, realist, and symbolist (Hamidian). Yushij’s concern with the social and political condition of his country moved him from romanticism toward realism. The last period coincided with Yushij’s poetic maturity and his “full-fledged social symbolism” coincided with his first examples of New Poetry (*Khoshchereh* 38). His frequent employment of symbols made him comparable with symbolist poets. Why did the realist poet then move from realism toward symbolism, or as some called it, social symbolism? Yushij could not ignore his social commitment and at the same time he was under the pressure of Reza Shah’s strong censorship and dictatorship. As a result, he chose to express his social concern through symbolic poetry. Therefore, Yushij created a democratic poetry according to the context of his own country.

Furthermore, the individuality of the Persian poet should be taken into consideration. It is true that domestic tyranny and dictatorship following Reza Shah’s rise to power pushed Yushij toward symbolism. Nevertheless, Yushij’s idea of symbols and their significance in poetry also contributed to that transformation. He believed that “symbols give depth to a poem. They give it magnitude. They give it cadence. They give it dignity, and the reader finds himself faced with grandeur” (Yushij, *Harf-haye Hamsayeh* 97). This explains the Persian poet’s adherence to symbolism even in the relatively open atmosphere after the fall of Reza Shah. The sociopolitical condition of Iran and Yushij’s idea of symbolism led to Persian New Poetry in the first half of the twentieth century. The present comparative study of two poetic traditions as well as the two sociopolitical contexts leads to a better appreciation of the inner dynamics of American free verse and Persian New Poetry, sustained by their own evolving differentiae.

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Notes

1. Although Fomeshi (*The Persian Whitman*) thoroughly studied the sociopolitical context of Whitman's America and that of (post-)constitutional Iran, he did not emphasize the similarities between the two.
2. He strongly opposed the constitution. His activities resulted in the coup d'état of 23 June 1908 resulted in the prorogation of Parliament. The patriots did not give up; they made him abdicate. His scarcely twelve-year-old son, Ahmad, became the new king.
3. For more on his ideas concerning democracy and democratic literature, refer to Tocqueville.
4. Modern Persian poetry named after Nima Yushij.
5. In fact, in Nimaic poetry several lines can form a *bayt*, a poetic unit.
6. For more on the association between Whitman and Yushij refer to Fomeshi, *The Persian Whitman*.
7. For more on Yushij's oppositional political stance please refer to Fomeshi, *The Persian Whitman*.
8. In November 1938, Arani as a leader of the group later known as the "Fifty-three," was brought to trial for collectivism, socialism, and communism. Pronounced guilty, he was sentenced to the maximum sentence possible under the law: ten years' solitary confinement. His death in prison sixteen months after the trial and at the early age of thirty-eight (due to what the police claimed to be a fatal attack of typhus) turned him into a martyr. When his colleagues and associates were released from prison during World War II and founded the Tudeh Party, they took Arani as their "spiritual leader."
9. Persian New Poetry is also called *She'r-e Azad*, after the French *vers libre*.
10. Form determined even the poetic genres. Since the slightest change in the external form of classical Persian poetry was easily noticeable and seriously reacted to, innovation in the external form of poetry was one of the most drastic steps toward democratizing Persian poetry. Rhyme has always been a ubiquitous formal characteristic of Persian poetry. Such a history elevated rhyme to the status of a vital element of poetry. "The custom of arranging poems in *divans* according to the alphabetical order of the last letter in the rhyme" also contributed to its prominence through time (Karimi-Hakkak 311).

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