



NIMĀ YUŠIJ II. PERSIAN POETRY

Nima Yušij's corpus of poetry comprises traditional, semi-traditional (e.g., the *čahārpāra*), and free verse poems (q.v., *še'r-e āzād*) that are remarkable for their novel form and refashioned imagery.

Nimā's lifetime coincided with major transformations in the norms of literary and artistic expression in Iran that were also marked by impassioned debates between traditionalists and modernists. While traditionalists insisted on adhering to the "highly formalistic fundamentals of classical Persian poetry" (Yarshater, 1984, pp. 43-44), modernists pined for a new poetic language in line with the exigencies of modern life. In this debate, the specificities of Nimā's departure from the conventions of classical Persian poetic form, language, and signification was a groundbreaking development in modern Persian poetry. His innovations engendered far-reaching and enduring change in Iranian poetic norms by redefining the relationship between form and content; re-functionalizing meter and rhyme; broadening the range of images, themes, and diction suitable to poetry; and permeating traditional topoi with new meaning and signification.

While Nimā's transition from classical (see [IRAN viii. PERSIAN LITERATURE \[2\] Classical](#)) to modern poetics was marked by a general progression, he continued to compose poems in traditional and semi-traditional, as well as free verse, styles throughout his creative life. His many quatrains and



panegyrics conform, for the most part, to formalistic, prosodic, imaginal, and linguistic conventions of classical poetry (Nimā, *Majmuʿa*, ed. Ṭāhbāz, 1985, pp. 641-709). His mastery of those norms is evident in “Sepida-dam” (“Daybreak”), a *qaṣida* (ode) composed in 1940:

Sepida-dam ke havā rang-e golsetān girad,
Delam ba yād-e gol-e ru-ye dust jān girad
(Nimā, *Majmuʿa*, ed. Ṭāhbāz, 1985, pp. 641-42)

At daybreak when the sky takes on the color of the rose garden,
My heart recalls the flower of the beloved’s face and is rejuvenated.

Nimā’s semi-traditional poems comprise some of his early experimentations with new variants of classical forms, such as *tarkib-band*, *tarji-band*, *mostazād*, and especially *mosammaṭ* (see [STANZAIC POETRY](#)). Experimentation with, and departure from, the established rhyme schemes and meters of classical *ʿarūz* (q.v.; “metrics”) was not rare during the Constitutional period (1906-11; see [CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION](#)). Many poets including [Ašraf Gilāni](#) (q.v.), [Adib-al-Mamālek Farāhāni](#) (q.v.), [Moḥammad-Taḳī Bahār Malek-al-Šoʿarāʾ](#) (q.v.), [Abuʾl-Qāsem Lāhuti](#) (q.v.), and at times [ʿĀref Qazvini](#) (q.v.), and [Adib Pišāvari](#) (q.v.), and later on [Mirzāda ʿEšqi](#) (q.v.) experimented with new schemes and meters. Yet, Nimā’s style is characterized by an unmatched predilection for innovation (for a detailed discussion see Purnāmdāriān, pp. 65-91; Šafiʾi Kadkani, 1966, pp. 123-30, 358-70). In his semi-traditional poetry, for example, the most celebrated of Nimā’s prosodic novelties were his compositions of series of *čahārpāra* (foursome) stanzas, resulting in a distinct quatrain sequence format with slightly modified classical rhyme patterns.

Even more significant was Nimā’s re-functionalization of conventional images and conceits in these semi-traditional style poems, which ultimately resulted in novel perspectives on salient themes of classical Persian poetry. His first poem exhibiting such a pattern is “Afsāna” (1921). One of the principal undercurrents running through “Afsāna” is Nimā’s dialogue with [Hafez](#) (q.v.), Iran’s paradigmatic classical lyricist. The dialogue is “both a public commentary on Nimā’s own poetic ambitions and visions, as well as a private meditation on his indebtedness to Hafez and the influence the former has had on the formation of the poem” (Papan-Matin, pp. 174-75). Despite this nod to classical Persian poetic tradition, the poem, composed in the *mosammaṭ* stanzaic form, is constructed around a dialogue between the personas of *ʿāšeḳ* (lover) and *afsāna* (legend), from which the poet, in



contravention of the norms of classical Persian poetry, is wholly absent (Nimā, *Majmu'ā*, ed. Ṭāhbāz, 1994, pp. 37-59). This technique was first introduced to Persian poetry through the versified translation of Molière's *Le Misanthrope*, attributed to Ḥabīb Eṣfahāni (q.v.), published in Istanbul as *Gozāreš-e mardom-goriz* in 1869 (Šafī'i Kadkani, 2011, pp. 270-71; ed. Iraj Afšār, Tehran, 2010). In the preface to "Afsāna," Nimā notes the poem's dual characteristic as both a *ḡazal* (q.v.) and a dramatic composition, intended to accommodate its performative function (Āryanpur, 1971, pp. 471-77).

While there is no novelty of form or meter in the entire 127 stanzas of this *mosammaṭ*, the combined effect of the poem's lexicon, dialogic structure, and representation of human nature marks a significant departure from many tenets of classical Persian poetry (Sarshar, 2004, pp. 104-15). Among the more specific contraventions of "Afsāna" is Nimā's modern conception of human nature, presented as being neither finite, as *Khayyām* (q.v.) claims in his poetry (Meskub, p. 41), nor as destined for union with god as suggested by the Sufis. Instead, Nimā represents human nature as a dialectical phenomenon that finds meaning in circularity and repetitiveness. Integral to this understanding of human nature is a conception of time as non-linear, which echoes Baudelairian concepts of modernity "defined as the paradoxical possibility of going beyond the flow of history through the consciousness of historicity in its most concrete immediacy, in its presentness" (Calinescu, p. 19). Yet the influence on Nimā of Western modernity in general, and of 19th-century French and English poets in particular, goes far beyond his novel conceptions of human nature and time appearing in "Afsāna." As he himself states: "Familiarity with a foreign language opened a new path before my eyes and might be reflected in my *Afsāna*" (Nimā, in *Nokostin kongra-ye nevisandegān*, p. 63). Yaḥyā Āryanpur has discussed some of the poem's affinities with the works of Alfred de Musset and Alfred de Vigny (Āryanpur, 1995, p. 588). Critics have also traced the influence of Théophile Gautier's 1863 "La source" on Nimā's "Čašma-ye kučak" (The small fountain) (Honarmandi, pp. 300-301), and Jean de La Fontaine's 1668 fable "Le Corbeau et le renard" on "Korus va rubāh" (The rooster and the fox) (Āryanpur, 1995, I, p. 584), as well as the influence on Nimā's "Ey 'āseq-e fesorda" (Oh downhearted lover) of the fifth act of Shakespeare's *Othello*, in the Persian translation of the play by Mas'ud Farzād (q.v.) (Purnāmdāriān, pp. 453-54; Nimā, *Majmu'ā*, ed. Ṭāhbāz, 1994, pp. 65-66, 84-85, 241-42).

"Māneli" (1947; also "Manali") is another long love poem in which the



romantic lover of Afsāna appears, this time in the guise of the eponymous fisherman (Nimā, *Majmu'ā*, ed. Ṭāhbāz, 1994, pp. 350-86), and falls in love with a mermaid. In the preface, Nimā notes that the poem was composed in response to “the Urashima of that friend who is no longer around,” referring to the 1944 translation by Sadeq Hedayat (q.v.) of the Japanese legend “Urashima Taro” (Hedayat, pp. 250-56; Nimā, *Majmu'ā*, ed. Ṭāhbāz, 1994, p. 350). According to Kamran Talattof, “the mermaid’s acting as Manali’s mouthpiece turns this symbolically rich poem into a retelling of Nimā’s own life story” (Talattof, 2000, pp. 38-44)

These and other specific points of comparison aside, the ideologies of certain 19th-century European poets and writers influenced virtually every aspect of Nimā’s vision as a poet, ultimately shaping not just his prosodic innovations, but the entire gestalt of his poetics (Aḡavān-e Ṭālet, 1978, pp. 166-67; Sarshar, 2000, pp. 160-77). As evidenced by his “Arzeš-e eḡsāsāt dar zendagāni-e honarpišagān” (The value of feelings in the life of artists; 1939) and *Harfhā-ye hamsāya* (The neighbor’s words; completed in 1955 and published posthumously), two of Nimā’s most fundamental takeaways from the Western canon are the binding relationship between literary novelty and socio-historical change, on the one hand, and the paramount centrality in artistic production of the artist’s sensibilities, feelings, and subjective experiences, on the other hand. These two principles stem from Nimā’s more general vision of the world as a vast consubstantial complex of which mankind is an integral part. A human being “embraces all that one generation inherits from another, and [all that] concerns the corporeal potentials, including the internal physical functioning of the body and a variety of connections with the outside world. For all these are conditions that, if they did not exist, the individual [human being] would have no meaning. The human creature means the sum total of all the external and internal conditions of his physical existence” (Karimi-Hakkak, 1995, p. 242; Nimā, *Ḥekāyat*, p. 28).

Nimā’s view of the above coexisting conditions of being propels virtually every drive for novelty in his poetics, in which a true work of art can only be the unadulterated expression of the artist’s intimate interaction with his/her environment and zeitgeist, a product of unmitigated subjective feelings and sensibility: “Skilled artists are accurate and faithful representatives of their times. Like clocks, they work with precision and in harmony [with the world around them]. They have no choice in this matter and cannot be anything other than what they are. They cannot pretend to be otherwise”



(Nimā, *Ĥekāyat*, p. 32). The ultimate goal of Nimaic poetics in his free verse thus becomes what Samuel Coleridge defined as “organic” as opposed to “mechanical” form (Coleridge, p. 471). In Nimā’s view, all the great figures of the Persian poetic canon abided by these same principles. Yet, what inarguably constituted organic form for Ferdowsi (q.v.), Hafez, or Neẓāmi Ganjavi, would by definition be mechanical if emulated by an Iranian poet in the post-Constitutional period. The latter’s poetics, Nimā maintained, must by necessity emerge organically from unmitigated subjective experiences of contemporary realities (Nimā, *Dar bāra-ye še’r*, p. 105). Nimā’s unrelenting insistence on the poet’s obligation to convey faithfully that poet’s subjective emotional experiences and observations was an unprecedented stance in the history of Persian poetry (Yusofī, p. 479; Purnāmdāriān, pp. 149-93).

Having thus defined the ontological objective of a modern poetics, Nimā, like other contemporary Iranian modernist poets sharing in his endeavor, faced the more critical challenge of poetic signification. In a poetic tradition where constitutive elements from meter to conceit and diction had become overloaded with significance over the millennia, any poet attempting to forge new organic forms outside the fixed perimeters of pre-coded conventions would “immediately [run] into the inevitable communication problem [by robbing] themselves of a wide range of familiar images, easily understood by force of habit” (Yarshater, 1984, p. 49). Yet in this challenge, Nimā succeeded where others had failed. In understanding the gravity of the task, he elected to re-functionalize essential elements of classical Persian poetry in fashioning his modern poetic idiom, rather than indiscriminately discarding them. In this regard, his most drastic innovation was structural and, by extension, prosodic. Seeing all characteristic features of classical poetry as now being mechanical, Nimā creates an organic form that replaces conventional symmetrical verse patterns with verses of varying lengths, thus freeing the poem from the constraints and uniformity of the fixed variants of basic meters of the Persian ‘Aruż. In this new form, rhymes are no longer compulsory markers of a preset scheme. Rather, they appear at the poet’s discretion to signal the completion of a distinct thought-pattern. Finally, he replaces characteristically symmetric structures with free flowing ones, comparable to the English ode, by comprising verse paragraphs of unequal length.

These innovations were the most common targets of Nimā’s traditionalist critics, who claimed that Nimā’s new prosody had failed to adhere to any rules and regulations of traditional poetry. They criticized him for using literary and



figurative idioms in unconventional ways, and condemned him for manipulating rules of grammar and syntax to the point of distorting language (Yusofī, p. 488). Yet, in their castigation, these same critics failed to recognize the extent to which Nimā in fact remains firmly bound to the core dictates of these very same traditional conventions (Aḳavān-e Tālet, 1982, pp. 102-4). Nimā’s prosodic innovation lies in his re-functionalization of the *arkān* (feet) of the *boḥur* (meters) by means of discarding the hitherto inflexible requirements for (a) uniformity in the quantitative length of verses in a poem; (b) the limited allowance of feet per meter (seldom, if ever, exceeding four per hemistich [*meṣra*]); and (c) the ending of each hemistich with a complete foot (Aḳavān-e Tālet, 1978, pp. 112-14; Falaki, pp. 76-77). Thus, while the verses of the *Šāh-nāma* follow the same metric pattern of two rhyming hemistiches in the *moteqāreb* meter (*fa’ulon fa’ulon fa’ulon fa’ul*), a poem by Nimā in the same meter might scan as follows:

fa’ulon fa’ulon fa’ulon fa’
 fa’ulon fa’ulon fa’ulon fa’ulon fa’ulon fa’ul
 fa’ulon fa’ul
 fa’ulon fa’ulon fa’
 fa’ulon fa’ulon fa’ulon fa’

Adherence to prescribed metric homogeneity, however, does not preclude iconoclasm in signification. For instance, in a tradition that readily associates the genre of *gāzal* with expressions of love, Nimā’s drastic dismantling of meaningful forms threatens an entire system of codification. Yet, Nimā eludes such a crisis by re-functionalizing prosody in a way that was unprecedented in the Persian poetic tradition. For instance, in “Qoqnus” (Phoenix; 1938), his first free verse poem, the groundbreaking form evades a crisis of signification by functioning as a constitutive part of a consubstantial whole that repeats the title bird’s mythology of rebirth and resurrection within the tautological unity of the poem. Just as the chicks emerge from the ashes of the phoenix, and the poem’s other sequence of unconventional imagery echoes the conceit of renewal, Nimā’s new meter emerges from the disassembled and subsequently reorganized *arkān* of the *možāre’* meter (see ‘ARUŽ’) to provide the organic form for a string of variants that each repeat the poem’s central theme of regeneration out of the wreckage of destruction, and resurrection contingent on dissolution (Sarshar, 2000, pp. 186-89).

Qoqnus, morġ-e košk’ān, āvāza-ye jahān
 Āvāra mānda az vazeš-e bādhā-ye sard,



Bar šāk-e keyzarān,
 Bar gerd-e ou be har sar-e šāk-i parandagān.
 (Yušij, ed. Ṭāhbāz, 1991, p. 222)

The phoenix, that sweet-voiced bird of worldly fame,
 Left homeless by the blowing of cold winds,
 On top of a bamboo stalk,
 Around her, atop each branch, the birds.

The language and imagery of Nimā's free verse poems follow an analogous process of re-functionalization. The primary characteristics of their prototypical counterparts in classical poetry are dismantled and then rearranged into varying configurations that yield novel symbols with meanings specific to their particular contexts. While this process produces a multiplicity of symbolic imagery in his free verse poems, his imagery still exhibits some commonalities with the traditional symbolism of the imagery in question. For example, in the case of birds, the nightingale always represents the longing of the classical poet of the *gāzal*, and the parrot embodies the classical poet's eloquence in language. But Nimā re-appropriates the bird/poet association to generate multifarious symbols by means of which he expresses his own subjective experiences in various circumstances. Similarly, the night's prototypical function in classical Persian poetry as a time of lonesome longing for reunion with the beloved gets re-functionalized in Nimā's poems such as "Mahtāb" (Moonlight; 1948) or "Hast šab" (It's night; 1955) as a space of solitude for the poet's contemplation on "the darker and more uncertain despair of our age" (Losensky, pp. 170-72), or as a general symbol "standing for all that is evil and unjust" (Vahabzadeh, 2015, p. 115). Thus, both bird and night symbols merge in a poem such as "Korus miḵ'ānad" (The rooster crows, 1946), allowing Nima to juxtapose the flightless morning bird of song (the rooster) with the winged mammal of the night (the bat) in a semiotic chiasmus, ultimately to herald the end of despondency and misfortune (Sarshar, 2000, pp. 213-20). The poem was published in the first issue of the journal *Korus Jangi*, co-founded by Gōlām-Ḥosayn Ġarib and Jalil Zīā'pur (q.v.), with Manučehr Šeybāni (Manuchehr Sheybani, q.v.) as its first poetry editor (Zīā'pur, pp. 80-82; Nimā, *Majmu'a*, ed. Ṭāhbāz, 1994, pp. 420-22, 444-45, 511):

Ququli qu! Ze keṭṭa-ye paydā,
 Migorizad su-ye nahān šabkur,
 Čun palidi druj kaz dar-e šobḥ,
 Be navāhā-ye ruz gardad dur



(Nimā, *Majmu'a*, ed., Ṭāhbāz, 1991, p. 421)

Cock a doodle doo! From the clearing,
The bat flees toward the obscure,
Like a foul lie through the morning's gates,
Retreating at the sounds of dawn

In Iranian mythology, Morḡ-e Āmin (Amen bird) is an angelic bird that flies through the skies crying “amen,” and it is said that if someone’s prayer ends the moment the bird utters “amen” then that person’s wish will be granted (Pādšāh, VI, p. 3945). In Nimā’s “Morḡ-e Āmin,” one of his most noted poems, the angelic bird is cast as the harbinger of hope (Nimā, *Majmu'a*, ed. Ṭāhbāz, 1991, pp. 491-97). “Lyric in mood, narrative in approach, and symbolist in method” (Yarshater, 1984, p. 48), the poem was written in the winter of 1952, when the struggle for the nationalization of Iran’s British-controlled oil industry was in full bloom. The poem features a dialogue in the rain between the bird and the people (*mardom*). Each time the bird and the people conclude an exchange expressing their mutual desire for a happy future, the refrain “*āmin*” (“amen”) occurs (Karimi-Hakkak, 1995, p. 262). The poet **Siāvaš Kasrā'i** (q.v.), in a 1965 essay titled “Parvāz dar hawā-ye morḡ-e āmin” (A flight in the skies of the amen bird), situates the bird in the context of other mythical birds in Persian literature and, by recasting the bird’s interlocutors, *mardom*, as *kalq*, the idiom particular to leftist literature for denoting the oppressed masses, offers a Marxist interpretation of the poem (for an analysis of the poem as an example of the nation’s conflicted encounter with modernity, see Ferdowsi, pp. 133-35).

While the principle of organic form is fundamental to Nimā’s new poetics and his ongoing efforts to forge novel images and assorted forms, it does not entirely resolve an ever-looming crisis of signification. In dismantling the linear relationship between the conventional signifier and its fixed signified, Nimā recasts these signifiers in tautologies in which the signified is always deferred and meaning remains perpetually open to interpretation. Thus, despite having followed all vectors of signification to their destination, the reader is drawn into an unending process of interpretation, motivated in vain by the desire to arrive at a singular satisfactory understanding. The result is a merry-go-round of signification that invariably compels the reader actively to participate in the labor of poetry production. This collaborative process, which is a hallmark of Nimā’s poetic craft, has been dismissed by his critics, who deny the poetic value of multivalent signification, and fault Nimā for what



they consider as his incomplete and convoluted images that are presumably impenetrable for those uninitiated to Nimā's poetics and worldview (Āl-e Aḥmad, 1978, pp. 12-35).

With respect to subject matter in his free verse poetry, Nimā's penchant for the natural world and his mandate for subjective expression and contemporaneity in artistic production yields a unique blend of nature, person, and society in his later compositions (Naficy, p. 113). Indeed, it is challenging to read many of Nimā's free verse poems without constantly questioning the impact of current events on his work. Yet, unlike the poets of the Constitutional period, Nimā rarely includes direct references to political events of the day in his poetry. In fact, after 1937 his allusions to contemporary events become increasingly veiled; a development that may be explained as much by the political atmosphere of the day as by Nimā's own predilection and perspectives on poetry.

The coup d'état of August 1953 (see [COUP D'ETAT OF 1332 Š./1953](#)) and the overthrow of premier Moḥammad Moṣaddeq's cabinet brought to an abrupt end hopes for political freedom and national sovereignty in the country. This reversal cast a shadow of despair on Nimā's poetry. His "Del-e fulādam" (My heart of steel), composed in the same year, unfolds as a nightmare:

Manam az har ke dar in sā'at gāratzadatar,
 Hama čiz az kaf-e man rafta be-dar,
 Del-e fulādam bā man nist.
 Hama čizam del-e man bud o konun mibinam,
 Del-e fulādam mānda dar rāh.
 (Nimā, Majmu'a, ed. Ṭāhbāz, 1991, p. 509)

I, more than any in this hour, am ravaged,
 Everything has slipped from my grasp,
 Gone is my heart of steel.
 My heart was everything to me, and now I see,
 My heart of steel is left behind.

In following years, Nimā's poetry becomes increasingly terse and pithy, and its language gravitates toward increased symbolism, a trend detectable in the literary corpus of the period in general (Yarshater, 1984, p. 49). After "Del-e fulādam" and "Ruy-e bandargāh" (On the harbor), also composed in 1953, and the undated "Šabpara-ye sāḥel-e nazdik" (The bat from the nearby shore),



most likely from the same period, Nimā's compositions from 1953 to 1958 consist of a total of ten poems (Nimā, *Majmu'a*, ed. Ṭāhbāz, 1994, pp. 508-11). These extremely succinct poems are among his most refined in language and structure. Also noteworthy in his later free verse poems is the absence of opaque constructions (Purnāmdārīān, pp. 359-433).

The continued proliferation of publications on Nimā's life and work (see Bibliography) attests to his unequivocal status as a trailblazer in modern Persian poetry. "Fundamental as the efforts of poets like Dehkhoda and 'Āref or Rafat and Lahuti were to the process of poetic modernity, they did not result in any change visible to the naked eye or immediately perceptible in other ways. [...] It was indisputably Nima who created a remarkable corpus of poems which impressed their differentness upon the reader even before they were read" (Karimi-Hakkak, 1995, p. 234). Although the nature and extent of Nimā's innovations continue to be debated, Nimaic verse has had indisputable and unprecedented impact on the style of many Iranian poets, ranging from those with a radically subversive approach to language, such as Manučehr Šeybāni and [Hušang Irāni](#) (q.v.), to poets whose works betray only faint echoes of the Nimaic tradition, usually in a general technical manner, such as [Sohrāb Sepehri](#) (q.v.). A number of poets influenced by Nimā have also made their own original contributions to modern Persian poetry in other ways. These include Mahdi Aḳavān-e Ṭāleṭ ([Mehdi Akhavan-e Saless](#), q.v.), Aḳmad Šāmlu, Siāvaš Kasrā'i, [Forūg Farroḳzād](#) (q.v.), Nāder Nāderpur ([Nader Naderpour](#), q.v.), Hušang Ebtehāj (known as Sāya), and Moḳammad-Rezā Šafī'i Kadkani, as well as a growing number of younger poets familiar with global modern aesthetics and who regard the modernist conception of poetry more as a point of departure than a source of emulation (Karimi-Hakkak, 1978, pp. 12-25; Farzan, pp. 336-38).

It is significant to note, as one critic observes, that "post-Nimaic Persian poetry has gone in many respects far beyond Nima's innovations. [...] As we saw in Nima's poem, the condition of possibility of the receding signified is the recognition of the multiplicity of voices. The dominant poetic modernism that claims to be Nima's poetic heir, however, repressed the multiplicity of voices, along with the ruptures that are associated with any plurality, in poetry as in cultural life;" and in so doing, Nimā's poetic heirs succeeded in attributing their monolithic vision of poetry to Nimā by marginalizing all aspects of his work that did not conform to their own vision (Vahabzadeh, 2004, pp. 201-19). Transcending what was once limited appreciation, on the one hand, and



widespread reproach, on the other hand, Nimā’s poetry has now attained general acclaim in Iran. At the same time, Nimā’s style has also attracted interest in countries with a shared tradition of Persian poetry, with some poets in those countries drawing on Nimā’s modernist style, whether directly by way of Nimā’s own works or through the works of other Iranian poets influenced by Nimā in various ways. Nimaic poetry is the poetry of the day in many Persian-speaking countries. According to Wali Ahmadi, “Although attempts to ‘renovate’ literary production in Afghanistan were made since the early decades of the twentieth century,” it was Nimā’s poetry that “resulted in the dominant formation of contemporary [Afghan] literature and culture” (Ahmadi, p. 222).