

REVIEW

**The Eight Books: A Complete English Translation. Sohrab Sepehri. Translated by Pouneh Shabani-Jadidi and Prashant Keshavmurthy (Leiden: Brill, 2022). 419 pp. ISBN 9789004472372**

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*The Eight Books: A Complete English Translation* is an invaluable addition to the Persian literary canon in English, as the first complete translation of Sepehri's work. The translators, Pouneh Shabani-Jadidi, a Persian linguist and literary translator with several published Persian literary translations, and Prashant Keshavmurthy, who has expertise in the Persian poetry of precolonized South Asia and premodern Persian literary criticism, have sought to encapsulate Sepehri's nuance and subtlety.

The works of Sohrab Sepehri (1928–1980) included the early *The Death of Color* (1951), *The Life of Dreams* (1953), *Torrent of Sun* (1961), and *East of Sorrow* (1961); followed by three books in sequence, *The Sound of Water's Footfall* (1965), *Traveler* (1966), and *The Expanse of Green* (1967); and finally *We Nothing, We Gaze* (1977). These eight books were published in a collection bearing the title *Hasht Ketab* (Eight Books; 1977). Translations of his most popular books appeared in other languages, including in English as early as 1972. Massud Farzan's translation of *Seda-ye Pay-e Ab* as “The Sound of Water's Footsteps” appeared in *Mundus Artium* 5, no. 1/2 (1972): 13–17.

The introduction to the volume under review offers an interpretation of Sepehri and a delineation of his experience of beauty and bewilderment. Accurately describing him as a poet whose work “has remained as difficult as it has been widely appealing across generations in Iran within his lifetime and to this day,” Shabani-Jadidi and Keshavmurthy indicate that they seek “a new kind of reader: the critic who would provisionally invent a code proper to . . . a particular case of modernist difficulty” (1). They define Sepehri as a modern Platonist and a modernist, in contrast to those who have characterized him as a Romantic or a mystical poet (24).

By arguing that the hegemonic technology of state-building—monopolized by male-dominated elites around the world—cheapened, brutalized, and emptied writing of the “numinous,” the translators characterize modernism here as a “minority and ephemeral resistance,” which necessitates that literary criticism “seize and size it up” (3). According to the translators, the global dynamics of modernism reveal themselves in Sepehri's work in his representation of God/god. They argue that “the speaker of Sepehri's poems is not especially interested in humans and is not as confident of a plentitude of meaningfulness as premodern Sufis were” Sepehri's god was “close by . . . personal and just one of his mundane if cherished possessions . . . inhibiting a region close to plant life” (6).

With a methodical approach, the introduction offers samples of other translations. Karimi-Hakak's earlier translation (2012) is introduced as styled in fluent free verse in the mode of contemporary American poetry of that period, whereas Bahiyeh Afnan Shahid's translation (2013) is said to make familiar the synthetic and imagistic ambiguities of Sepehri, seeing him as a modern mystic. Kazim Ali and Mohammad Jafar Mahallati are presented as translating Sepehri as a modern Sufi seeking unity with all beings (24). The late Franklin Lewis's translation is viewed as replicating Sepehri's opaque language and is

counted akin to the present volume, which aims for a “middle path between a contemporary literary register in English and fidelity to Sepehri’s odd lexical and syntactic arrangements as well as his line breaks and typographical choices,” trying to replicate rhymes when syntax allows (25).

The introduction describes Sepehri as “modern,” suggesting that his work is expressive primarily of the contemporary world. This too ubiquitous view disregards his profound knowledge of and connection with traditional art, religious symbols and texts, rituals of various traditions, and colloquial language, as clearly presented in his three essays, published posthumously as *Otagh-e Abi (The Blue Room)*. These essays, as well as his short autobiography and his letters from travels around the world, serve as often-forgotten guides for reading and translating his poetry. One of the simple ways in which he reveals his connection to tradition while innovating is his use of colloquial words specific to central Iran, to places like Kashan, from which he hailed. In “Estrangement,” for example, he uses the word *سلخ selkh*, a water reservoir, created when the water of the qanat decreases. *Selkh* means “pond,” as in *لب سلخ* (by the pond) not *salkh* (tannery) as in: “I should remember to go by the tannery and sketch the goats (295).” In the same poem, Sepehri makes use of another colloquial term, *چوبه آشویه choubeh*, or *chouyeh (shouyeh)* which refers to a plant, commonly used for washing, and not a stick (295). I must remember to go by the pond to sketch the goats.

As the introduction states, “the dictionary is not the best key to translating a poet,” not “one as richly ambiguous as Sepehri,” especially because “interpreting his imagery and syntax into the familiar betrays his commitment to estranging everyday language by subtle distortions and ambiguous metaphors” (24). Sepehri’s use of colloquial terms that are not commonly used in modern Persian is a case in point. Sepehri’s work is, in fact, a critique of a mode of knowledge production. He elucidates upon this in “Conversations with the Professor,” an essay that champions traditional art and architecture while at the same time displaying a detailed critical knowledge of global art history.

Another missed point appears in the translation of the following verse:

اگر کاشف معدن صبح آمد، صدا کن مرا

“Wake me up, if the explorer of the mine of morning arrives,” translated erroneously as “If the mine-explorer arrives at dawn, call me” (32). Sepehri is not awaiting the mine-explorer in the morning. Rather he is stating his opposition to the mining of metals and other pollutants of Earth and longing for the explorer of “the mine of morning” *کاشف معدن صبح* to arrive. This meaning is further cleared in the following lines by Sepehri. “Tell me about the bombs that, when I was sleeping, fell.... In the mayhem when the sky’s armoured wheel marched on the child’s dream To what sentiment of peace did the canary bind the yellow string of its song. Tell me what innocent goods entered the ports. What science understood the positive music of the whiff of gunpowder” (p. 327). This is a reflection of his post-World War II philosophy of history, that is, the failure of modern Western civilization to reconceptualize a truly global civilization, instead bringing it to the edge of nuclear self-annihilation. This aspect of Sepehri’s thinking has been missed by commentators on his work.

Regarding grammatical points, the translators have aptly chosen the use of God or god according to context, due to the absence of capitalization in Persian. In translating the pronoun *او*, which refers to both he and she in Persian, they have opted for He/he in all cases. Loyalty to the poet’s language would have dictated avoiding gender specification for God, due to the absence of grammatical specification in Persian.

The book includes a bilingual table of contents, a 25-page introduction, a translation of Sepehri’s brief autobiography, and the English translation facing the original Persian, followed by helpful bilingual alphabetical and subject indexes. This translation provides a great opportunity for English readers to read and grapple with the layers of meaning concealed in the poetry of one of the most talented and cherished contemporary Persian poets.