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Tara Stubbs

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## A REVIEW OF *POETRY IN A GLOBAL AGE*, BY JAHAN RAMAZANI

Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry in a Global Age* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), pp. 323, ISBN: 978-0-226-73014-1.

*Reviewed by Tara Stubbs*

For readers who are familiar with the work of Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry in a Global Age* is a logical extension of his general approach, which combines serious attention to the detail of a text with a searching and expanding sense of the “global.” To that end his latest book, “[w]ithout aspiring to comprehensiveness, [...] raises a series of questions that are meant to select tranches of its larger subject for close analysis” (22). While Ramazani asserts on the first page of this carefully argued study that “[t]he making of a poem, as of a pencil, amalgamates, reshapes, and compresses materials that span large swaths of the globe” (1), he also notes that, unlike the analogous pencil, “[i]t can be difficult to keep a poem fastened exclusively to a place; even as it evokes a site, it darts in multiple directions” (57). It is no surprise, then, that Yeats—whose poems “span large swaths of the globe” and whose work Ramazani has already discussed at length in *Yeats and the Poetry of Death: Elegy, Self-Elegy, and the Sublime* (1990)<sup>1</sup>—should be one of the main focuses in this book. Other chapters focus on poets or topics that Ramazani views as either “modernist” or “postcolonial,” discussing: “Poetry of the First Global War” (i.e., WWI), “The Local Poem in a Global Age,” “Poetry and Tourism in a Global Age,” “Modernist Inflections, Postcolonial Directions,” “Poetry and the Transnational Migration of Form,” “Poetry, the Planet and the Ecological Thought: Wallace Stevens and Beyond,” “Seamus Heaney’s Globe,” “Code-Switching, Code-Stitching: A Macaronic Poetics?,” and “Poetry, Untranslatability, and World Literature.”

The above list goes some way to underscoring the erudition, range, and eclecticism of Ramazani’s approach. This is not a book for readers who are new to poetry, or to transatlantic or postcolonial poetics. At times, Ramazani assumes the reader’s deep knowledge of twentieth- and twenty-first century poetry: for example, during a complex discussion of Agha Shahid Ali’s poem “I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror” in relation to “Loco-Descriptive Poetry” (72–74), Ramazani notes that the poem’s “countries” are “figured as colored spaces on a map (grimly elaborating the playfully fantastical evocations of Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘The Map’)” (73). The lack of a citation for Bishop’s poem adds to the sense that readers are expected to follow, and concur with, the inferences Ramazani’s draws. The study is a plea for a return to the practice of close reading, and a diatribe

against the “distant reading” that Ramazani fears is taking over transatlantic and global studies in particular. As Ramazani points out, “‘Distant reading’ is especially incongruous with the study of poetry, since if you’re reading poetry only at a distance you’re not reading it as poetry” (124).

All the close readings in this study pay careful attention to the formal qualities of the poem, acting upon the assumption that the poet was aware of these forms when they came to write. The chapter on Yeats is no exception, where Ramazani’s readings of a cluster of Yeats’s poems about the “Orient,” broadly conceived, point to Yeats’s active engagement with forms such as the haiku and the tanka (150). Some of these claims seem a little stretched, as Ramazani himself points out, following an extended close reading of Yeats’s “Imitated from the Japanese” (148–50). Ramazani notes, “Even if Yeats isn’t deliberately engaging the Japanese *tanka* or *tanku*, he develops parallel forms that balance symmetric with asymmetric structures, setting two stanzas of two lines against one of five, and in the final quintet, three lines against a couplet” (150). Other mentions of Yeats’s poetry in the rest of the study draw on his poetic responses to World War I in relation to their complicated relationships with Heaney’s and Auden’s poetry of elegy (44–45); and on possible transatlantic and Caribbean readings of Yeats’s “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” (58–58). However, most of the analysis of Yeats’s poetry appears in chapter 6, a bold and confident reassessment of “Yeats’s Asias.”

The central question of this chapter, with its full title “Yeats’s Asias: Modernism, Orientalism, Orientalism,” is: “Can a canonical Western poet like Yeats be rethought as both orientalist and anti-orientalist, as not only interested in but profoundly shaped by a variety of Asian cultures—Indian, Japanese, Arab, and perhaps surprisingly, via Byzantium, Iranian—and if so, what are the repercussions for modernism and orientalist critique?” (23). Implicit in this chapter, and its attendant claims, is a reading of Yeats as essentially a “modernist” poet to be compared directly with Yeats and Eliot, and not as one of the “last Romantics,” as Yeats described himself in “Coole Park and Ballylee 1931” (*VP* 74–75). The chapter also sets Yeats up as a “postcolonial” poet *through* his Anglo-Irish background, by describing Yeats’s “divided allegiances as an Anglo-Irish writer to both English and Irish culture” as “akin to many other postcolonial writers with split affiliations” (147). Both claims are integral to Ramazani’s project, which positions Yeats as someone who draws upon the East in two ways—as both colonial consumer and postcolonial idealist, where the latter role enables him to learn from those cultures with which he finds analogies for his own ideas and systems. As is often the case with *Poetry in a Global Age*, readers need to go along with these claims, and to take them almost as fact, in order to follow the readings through.

Though Ramazani's chapter on Yeats doesn't offer answers, instead opening the field of study and arguing for the intrinsic value of this expansiveness, it does ask some intriguing questions. Ramazani summarises his approach to Yeats thus:

Among his contemporaries, Yeats was the only major poet who developed a multifaceted interest in East, South, and West Asian cultures; as such, he deserves a prominent role in reconsiderations of Euromodernism's non-Western engagements. Scholarship on Yeats and Asia has usually focused on either his Indian or his Japanese investments—understandably so, given their longevity and depth—but what about the West Asian coordinates that have received less attention? What happens if we pluralize Yeats's Asias and consider them together—South, East, and West? Is his Asian-facing poetry orientalist, anti-orientalist, or both? And how can his poetry help us rethink the paradigm of orientalism? (133)

This claim is worth quoting at length because it underlines firstly how Yeats's interest in Asian cultures is plural—hence Ramazani's focus on Yeats's "Asias"—and how this pluralism is unique to Yeats among his contemporaries. To that end, one of the most interesting discussions in this chapter focuses on Yeats's use of the term "Asiatic" and its links with Persian culture in "The Statues" (134–35). Secondly, bringing these "Asias" together reads them as less discrete than critics might have made them seem, perhaps unintentionally: Would Yeats have seen these "Asias" as distinct, Ramazani asks, and if not, what does this tell us about the ways that he viewed the "Orient"? While the chapter concludes that Yeats "took Asian cultures seriously: he engaged them, performed them, learned from them, and made poetry and theater enmeshed with them" (154), it is still attuned to the ways in which that learning might be accidental, or secondhand, or superficial. Often criticism takes too seriously a poet's engagements with apparent "influence" in order to stress the importance of that influence; Ramazani's arguments, and the study as a whole, show how such engagements might be contingent or provisional. Yet they are still relevant to a study of "modernism's global bearings" (154), as his complex, dazzling, and sometimes facetious readings of poems such as "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (148–49), "Byzantium" (140), "The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid" (142–45), "The Indian to His Love" (146), and "Lapiz Lazuli" show (139, 148).

Ramazani's bold and complex close readings take in countries and continents as they go, traveling like the eponymous "poem" that moves from virtual to actual to imagined space, absorbing influences and ideas and associations. For the present reviewer, the close readings dazzle in the same way that Helen Vendler's or Christopher Ricks's do—revealing as much about the assuredness of the critic as of the material they are critiquing. But this might be Ramazani's point: his reading, and the confidences that this betrays, will be

different from any other's reading, and it is also informed by his experiences and by his travels; as he points out early in the study, his own position as an Iranian American critic in relation to Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" has been shaped by his experience "teaching at the Yeats International Summer School," where he "even once won a Guinness for reciting the whole poem from memory" (59). Even the introduction concludes that "[a]nother study of the same subject would have pursued other paths and selected other poems" (24), acknowledging its own subjectivity.

Therefore, the study as a whole is valuable to readers of poetry, and to readers of Yeats, both as an exercise in tracing the global experiences and travels of a poem, and in showing how that experience will never end, so that a poem can never be completely understood. This viewpoint might be both liberating or frustrating, depending on what kind of reader or critic we are. Even our idea of the "global," and our understanding of it is, as Ramazani points out, "partly given, partly made" (190). This knowledge that we will never get to the end of things offers a challenge to global poetic studies, one that is perhaps unsurmountable. When Ramazani discusses "the translatables and the untranslatables of lyric poetry" (238), he also asks us to consider the articulated and the unarticulated in poetics, as well as within cultures, languages, and identities.

It is unsurprising that at times in the study even Ramazani appears to be losing track of all of the ways in which we need to understand the lyric in a global age (he stresses the indefinite article here, as we are just living in one "global age" of many). One example is instructive. In discussing the interrelations between Poetry and Tourism in chapter 3, Ramazani notes: "We should heed the cross-cultural nuances and self-reflective energies of the simultaneously touristic and post-, meta-, extra-, para-, even anti-touristic poems we read" (100). We might ask why the prefixes stop there. Can they ever stop? Yet at the same time, Ramazani concedes that the pull of place, however experienced by readers and poets alike, will never really leave us. As he points out in the introduction, "The 'nation'—as a reality, concept, ideology—isn't 'over,' won't disappear anytime soon, and continues to exert a powerful influence on literary cultures and their transmission" (10). Though the "global" continues to exert ever-expanding and complicating influences on the way we write, read, and respond to poetry, the idea of "nation" still preoccupies our minds, in both a familial and a political sense. Ramazani's study shows us that we need to be open to the ways in which all these influences, and (potentially, infinitely) more, are operating on a poem—while it is conceived, while it is written, while it is disseminated, and while it is read.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 See Jahan Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death: Elegy, Self-Elegy, and the Sublime* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).