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Poetry as a Mode of Existence in Modern Iran

Developing my previous work on poetry as the emblem of culture in modern Iran, this essay considers the existential dimension of this process and investigates the power of poetry and its affects through an historical and ethnographic account mainly drawn from fieldwork in the city of Shiraz. First I consider poetry as a particular form of sociality and describe how in settings such as anjumans (poetic gatherings) the capacity to express and feel pathos is cultivated and related to normative expectations that concern at once the form of the poems and the sensations they produce. Second, I look at how these expectations are turned into an existential ground by discussing my conversations with a modernist poet and his work and reflecting on how poetic and affective language are sublimated into each other. I conclude suggesting that in twentieth century Iran, poetry has become an equivalent of “life.” In different if not opposite ways these settings suggest that verses are supposed to embody the experiences of an affective subject and stand as its “true” and ultimate expression. This “vitalistic” understanding of poetry marks a particular relationship with secularism and undergirds a specific “bio-political” model that moves between a normative moment in which poetry works as a system of judgment of people and things, and an immanent one in which poetry works as a potentiality.

Friday, April 5, 12:00 - 1:30 pm  
10 Sachem, Room 105  
Light lunch will be provided

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