

*Parvin Loloï and William Oxley, Poems from the Divan of Hafiz, Acumen Publications, 6 The Mount, Higher Furzeham, Brixham, South Devon, TQ5 8QY, U.K., 2013, 82pp.*

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The fourteenth-century Persian poet Hafiz was, without a doubt, one of the world's greatest poets of love. His verses brilliantly express desire and passion, both divine and human. He frequently invites his admirers to engage in the art of loving and caring for others. His advice to mankind is to avoid all but love, its lament and its madness:

*Seek not from us anything within the boundaries of sanity,  
For the Master of our order knew rationality to be sin.  
(Divān, Khanleri, ed., vol. 1, g 48, v. 4).*

Hafiz's genius in the composition of *ghazals* (love lyrics) overshadows that of other giants of Persian poetry such as Rumi, 'Aṭṭār, Khājū, and Salmān. In fact, the only composer of *ghazals* who can be compared to him is Sa'di. Hafiz's mystical *ghazals* speak of both divine and worldly love, and the inebriating union with the heavenly beloved. Hafiz uses wine as the symbol for intox-

icating love. More vigorously than most of his contemporaries, Hafiz decried the hypocrisy and sham that existed in the society of his time (as it has in all societies, ensuring the continuing relevance of this aspect of his work). Hafiz's popularity and his influence on Persian literature, language, and culture are enormous. Despite the magnitude of his contribution, the historical details we know of his life are exceptionally vague, and the brief references found in *tadhkiras* (anthologies with biographical sketches) are often unreliable and sometimes even fabricated. This dearth of reliable information has persuaded some scholars and researchers to use Hafiz's poetry as a reference for factual details about his life and historical milieu, sometimes to an unreasonable degree. The earliest surviving document about Hafiz is an introduction to Hafiz's *Divān* (or collection of works) written by one of his contemporaries, who was widely believed to have been named Muḥammad Gulandām. However, scholars are still uncertain about the true identity of the author as well as the accuracy of the text. Most sources do agree about Hafiz's given name, Shams al-Din Muḥammad. They also believe that the pen name "Hafiz"—a title generally bestowed on those who had a vast knowledge of the Qur'ān and had memorized it as well as to those who had immense knowledge of music and rhyme—is reasonably correct. The frequent echoes of Qur'ānic expressions and references in Hafiz's poems reflect this deep understanding. Information about Hafiz's immediate family either comes from sources written after his death that are considered unreliable, or is based on speculation derived from often exaggeratedly literal readings of his poetry.

One of the foremost challenges Persian poetry poses to the untrained reader is its mysticism. Mystics realized many centuries ago that they could "describe the indescribable" in poetry far more successfully than in prose. To escape the limitations of the poetic vocabulary that had built up by that time, they filled every word with mystical significance. What originated as intoxicating wine became the "wine of union with the divine beloved" on which the mystic is "infinitely love-drunk." Stunning young *sāqīs* (cupbearers) with whom one might like to linger became *shāhids* (witnesses to the alluring beauty of the eternal beloved). After the mystics had thus infused the poetic vocabulary, every word developed such profound associated meaning from lyricism and mysticism that the two combined into one. Of course, some poets wrote poetry that was clearly and distinctly mystical; in fact, it is much more difficult to identify poetry that is not mystical. It is pointless to ask, for instance, whether Hafiz's poetry is "Sufi poetry" or not. In reality, in the fourteenth cen-

ture it was difficult to write a *ghazal* that did not resonate with mystical nuances enforced by the poetic vocabulary itself.

For centuries, translators and scholars have found Hafiz's poems almost impossible to render into other languages without losing either their music or their profound meaning. Hafiz's poems are fairly easy to understand, and yet almost every line poses a problem, either of ambiguity or of apparent disconnection to the line that follows. Such are the difficulties that scholars and translators face in writing on and translating Hafiz's poetry. An additional formidable obstacle to overcome, for translators of Hafiz (or any other Persian poet) is the fact that the Persian language has only one pronoun to indicate the third-person singular.

More than most of their predecessors, Parvin Loloi and William Oxley have broken through these obstacles in their translations from the *Divān* of Hafiz. While managing to preserve most of the meaning in their translations, they have also succeeded in giving the poems some rhyme and preserved a good deal of the poetic tempo. Although Loloi and Oxley admit that their translations are far from perfect—quoting James Howell, they humorously and properly compare translation of Persian poetry into English to the act of “presenting the reverse side of an oriental carpet”—they nonetheless have created an impressively original work. Throughout *Poems from the Divan of Hafiz*, one senses the harmony, mutual understanding, and expertise of two translators (a scholar and a poet) combining their talents, skills, and efforts to produce translations that are obviously a work of poetic scholarship in the best and highest sense.

Furthermore, while academics will want to compare these translations with other contemporary and earlier (and often outdated) versions, *Poems from the Divan of Hafiz* will also be a pleasurable read for laypersons unfamiliar with Persian poetry. The poems are well presented and their beautiful ambiguity is to a degree preserved, even if compared to that of the originals, it is inevitably somewhat reduced.

The book is made up of an introduction, a “Note on Translating Hafiz,” *ghazals*, *queṭa'āt*, “The Song of the Sāqī” (*Sāqī-Nāma*), “The Song of the Minstrel” (*Mughanī-Nāma*), random quatrains (*rubā'iyāt*), and a glossary of proper names.

Loloi's introduction summarizes scholarship concisely and provides an insight into the poet's life and times and is followed by Oxley's short translator's note. The glossary of proper names comprises pages 79 to 82. Unfortun-

nately, the book includes only forty-five randomly selected *ghazals*, two *qaṭ'a* (fragments, or short poems having no fewer than two lines and rhyming only in the last hemistichs, as distinguished from the *ghazals* or *qaṣidas*, in which the hemistichs of the first line rhyme as well), “The Song of the Sāqī,” “The Song of the Minstrel,” and five random quatrains.

This is one of the finest translations I have read. The translation is largely accurate, hewing close to the original Persian poems. Furthermore, while Loloi and Oxley transmit Hafiz’s thematics, his ambiguous poetic structure, and the layers of meaning so typical of Persian *ghazals* into eloquent and flowing English, unlike some contemporary translations that are more imaginative than precise, Persian speakers can easily scan the translations against the original verse. What amazes the reader is the beautiful balance between the music of the poetry and its meaning.

To transmit the Persian poetic spirit into another language requires a spectacular talent and a deep knowledge of both languages. A good knowledge of Persian, however, is something quite different from an understanding of Hafiz’s poetic utterance. Indeed, however much is written about Hafiz, especially by persons well acquainted with and cognizant of the heights and depths of his verse and his astonishing powers of eloquence, the scholarship alone remains insufficient. The work of Parvin Loloi and William Oxley, in its collaboration between a scholar and a poet, represents a huge step forward in the comprehension of Hafiz’s poetry and in its introduction to other cultures. For this we must offer our gratitude and appreciation.