Hafiz's Little Book of Life • Talking Points

1. Who was Hafez?
2. What aspect of Hafez do you bring forth that's not commonly pointed out?
3. How did you and Erfan Mojib come to translate Hafez?
4. What were your working methods?
5. How did you pick the poetry's five sections, and why are they called "gardens"?
6. You don't call your book "translations" but rather "Made new." Why is that?
7. What are a few points which you take into consideration as a translator?
8. Why do you say "Beware of fakes!"?
9. What 's your take on Hafez as an oracle?
10. Along with +250 brief poems, what other amenities are there in addition to a bibliography?
11. Why do you mention "gender fluidities" when referring to Hafez' poetry encompassing all phases of love?
12. What is Sufism?
13. Is there anyone living today to whom you might compare Hafez?

1 Who was Hafez?

Lyrics by Hafez of Shiraz (14th century) were sung across the Persianate empire. Ever since, he remains the most beloved in all of Persian literature. His mystic, lyric poetry is cherished as one of the great achievements of world literature, on a par with Dante, Goethe, and Shakespeare. Rumi dives deep into an ocean of wisdom; Hafez's vision is as multifaceted as life itself: fusing literature, philosophy, and religion, he is truly a force of nature. His nickname "Tongue of the Invisible" refers to widespread belief in him as an oracle. And he's also widely considered untranslatable.

2 What aspect of Hafez do you bring forth that's not commonly pointed out?

In the West, Hafez is commonly considered as a mystic. In Iran, he's also an exemplar of a kind of worldly, free-spirited renegade for which there's a special word in Persian, *Rendi*. So we begin our book with his lyrics about the world, where we see his iconoclastic views of politics, and war; his fierce disdain for hypocrisy; his compassion for the poor, etc. His *rendi* spirit shows up elsewhere, but this initial taste gives it a solid grounding.

3 How did you and Erfan Mojib come to translate Hafez?

We met via the Internet, thanks to the international literary website *Asymptote*. After we'd worked together on *The Book of Absence,* a manuscript by contemporary Sufi and dissident Alireza Roshan, Gary was trying to sell it. One publisher said, "No – but we're looking for someone to bring us an edition of Hafez." We'd never have dreamt of translating Hafez until we were asked to. Then it all came together.

4 What were your overall working methods?

Erfan suggested we work from the adaptations by renowned filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami (who made single lines into poems unto themselves). Gary suggested we collaborate using a Google Doc and Google teleconferencing (Google Duo, now Google Meet). Once we had a growing body of material, we gave the book an overarching structure of five sections. When consructing a manuscript, we based our arrangement of the vignettes upon classical Persian music.

5 How did you pick the poetry's five sections, and why are they called "gardens"?

The five-part structure mirrors orchestral symphonic form. Moreover, the five parts reflect a Sufi journey. We begin with the world, with all its potential

but disappointments too. With that as overture, we enter into a scherzo about wine. Wine might help us escape from our suffering, but it can also initiate us into a realm beyond the material world.

Love is the largest section. As we saw with the world, and more so with wine, here the mundane and the divine mirror and magnify each other as the poet sings of separation from and longing for union with the Beloved. This brings us to a place of wisdom on many levels. Ecstasy provides a coda where being one with the One is touched.

The first poem evokes a caravan. So the gardens might represent caravansarei way stations. To paraphrase the entry in the Glossary, the word for garden in early Persian is *Pairidaeza* – from which our word "Paradise" derives. Heaven, in the Qur'an, is a garden. The Garden of Eden was possibly located in the Persian Gulf. The possibilities of canals and flowerbeds amid desert landscapes are more common in Iran than Saudi Arabia, which is 90% desert, Turkmenistan 80%, and Iraq 40%. Iran is only 20% desert, yet water can still be scarce. Gardens have been an integral part of Iranian culture for centuries, and they continue to hold deep significance in contemporary Iranian society.

[A few selections from each "garden," gladly furnished by request. }

6 You don't call your book "translations" but rather "made new." Why?

Shakespeare, William Blake, or Emily Dickinson don't require retranslation for readers of English. But it's for new generations to make new translations of world classics: Akhmatova, Basho, Homer, Lao-tse, Pushkin, Lady Shikibu, and so on.

The phrase "make new" stems from a major figure in literary translation, Ezra Pound. In his rendition of Confucius, he condenses four Chinese pictograms into into three Anglo-Saxon monosyllables: "Make it new!"

We incorporated various fresh prosody techniques, such as field poetics, and centered poetry. Besides contemporary filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami's adaptations, we also drew from Stephane Mallarmé's 1897 revolutionary transformation of the book, from a reading device into a spiritual instrument.

That is, we took a right and left page as a single unit, rather than two separate fields.

Building upon that, each minimalist poem can be read as complete, and also as a tile of a larger mosaic where they're intended to cohere as a massive, maximalist, single, long poem. (If they do, is up to you.) This wouldn't have been possible without creative collaboration with the brilliant typographer Kathryn Sky-Peck, hand-picked by our editor hand-for the book.

7 What are a few points you consider in translation?

Translation is not like tracing paper, reproducing a melody note-for-note. Just as we avoided translating to a metronome*, we didn't aim to follow Persian meter and rhyme. Instead, we crafted cuttings so they could stand on their own as poetry in English while adhering to the imagery and thought, rhythm and diction of the original. Dancing with Hafez, he kept us on our toes as he commands a wide range of tones to match in English. And there's invariably a choice between saying what the original *says* and saying what the original *means*. Translation also navigates between sounding foreign and bringing new vistas to the target language.

And there's the danger of Orientalism – partcularly cultural appropriation and cultural erasure. (Beware of fakes!)

As a generally sound practice, we enlisted expert pairs of eyes, in this case Iraj Anvar and Elizabeth T Gray, Jr, to vet our renditions against the Persian.

8 Why do you say "Beware of fakes!"?

It's ironic. The name "Hafez" is popular in English thanks to books by Daniel Ladinsky, which have sold over a million copies. His website goes into why he doesn't call them translations. To be clear, we note the poems in his books have no corresponding Persian originals.

One might excuse this as "chanelling." We agree with Omid Safi, scholar of Islamic mysticism (Sufism) and contemporary Islamic thought, and consider this as cultural erasure. We include his article in our bibliography.

9 Along with +250 brief poems, what other features are there, in addition to a bibliography?

There's a prose portrait of Hafez and Shiraz in his day (with a specially commissioned map); a series of translators' notes (comparison to Persian originals, a spotlight on intentional ambiguity, an analysis of innovation); a profuse glossary (50 entries), a brief essay on Hafez as an oracle.

Last but not least, Ari Honarvar honored us with a splendid foreword. Moreover, Samara Naeymi performed the audio edition (Tantor Media).

10 What 's your take on Hafez as an oracle?

I can share an uncanny incident. The day the manuscript was due, I was assembling all the moving parts into one file. Then, double-checking everything, it all looked good ~ until I noticed that, somehow, the entry on "hair" was missing from the glossary. It had already been written, and just required me cutting and pasting it in.

Well, later that same week, in Iran, a 22-year-old girl named Mahsa Jina Amini, was pulled aside by the Morality Police who took issue with how correctly or improperly her hair was tucked into her *hijab* (hair covering). Official accounts deny it, but it is widely believed she was beaten so badly that she went into a coma and soon passed out of life.

Women in Iran live in terror over this, and Mahsa Amini sparked a prairie fire of demonstrations across Iran and internationally. Under the banner "Woman Life Freedom,"the protests were the largest and most widespread in the country since the 1979 Revolution (transforming Iran from a monarchy under the Shah, to an Islamic republic, IRI, the Islamic Republic of Iran, led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini).

Coincidence?

11 Why do you mention "gender fluidities" when referring to Hafez' poetry encompassing all phases of love?

Ambiguity, in and of itself, is an essential tactic for freedom in Iran. In Persian poetry, gender is ambiguous. As translators, we often opted for “you” rather than “he” or “she,” leaving it up to the reader. In Hafez’ day, homoeroticism was not uncommon. Wine-bearers (*saqi*), for instance, were usually young boys, trained like geishas in various arts.

12 What is Sufism?

Sufism is often most easily seen as the mystic dimension of Islam. In our glossary, we quote Sufi scholar Alan Godlas who writes: “Sufism is believed to be both a historical reality that appeared in the Muslim world after the advent of Islam as well as a ‘reality without a name,’ a trans-historical phenomenon that has been present from the time that the first human experienced a sense of separateness from and attraction to ultimate reality.”

13 Is there anyone living today to whom you might compare Hafez?

Bob Dylan.

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* Here’s a stanza from the first translation of Hafez into English, by Welsh jurist William Jones, based on a Latin translation, published in 1771, in a journal called *Asiatic Miscellany*, following a metronome rather than natural cadences of speech.

"Sweet maid, if thou wouldst charm my sight / And give my heart a cheerful light, / Lay aside that veil, those tresses rare, / And show what beauty lurks there."
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