The Kindly Interrogator

Alireza Abiz

THE KINDLY INTERROGATOR

translated from Persian by
W.N. Herbert & Alireza Abiz

Shearsman Books

First published in the United Kingdom in 2021 by
Shearsman Books Ltd
PO Box 4239
Swindon
SN3 9FN

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
(this address not for correspondence)

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-770-4

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Introduction

Alireza Abiz belongs to the '90s generation of Iranian writers, who pioneered a literary revival in the wake of the Islamic Revolution and the eight years war with Iraq. The poetry of this generation is informed by postmodern literary theory and is marked by new experiments with both language and form.

The origins of modern Persian poetry are found in the constitutional revolution of 1906 and the intellectual movements before and after that historical landmark, which brought Persian poetry into the forefront of social struggle. Poets used poetry as a vehicle of protest and enlightenment, deploying elements of everyday language in an effort to make poetry more accessible to the masses. Cultural interactions with the West and translations of Western literature started to influence Persian poetry. Modern concepts entered classical forms, and gradually the forms themselves changed to accommodate modern approaches.

Nima Yushij, called the father of *She'r Noe* (New or Modern Poetry), is considered the first significant poet who advocated a form similar to blank verse at the turn of the twentieth century. He believed that Persian classical poetry had been too abstract, subjective, and metaphysical, and advocated a more objective approach and natural diction. His followers developed his ideas and introduced free verse and prose poetry.

In the 1960s the movement that Nima started reached its pinnacle, and some of the best known modern poets, including Forugh Farrokhzad, Mehdi Akhavan Saleth, Ahmad Shamlou and Sohrab Sepehri, published their works. Different movements followed and free verse in diverse styles and schools became the mainstream form of poetry writing.

Modern Persian poetry was strongly involved with social and political issues, and advocated idealistic visions of freedom and equality. Many poets were involved in political struggles and were prosecuted for their writings both before and after the 1979 Revolution. After the revolution and due to the eight year war,

publication of literature suffered, but in the 1990s, poetry experienced a new revival.

In today's Iran, various post-modern styles live side by side with centuries old classical poetry – which has itself diversified into numerous branches, such as post-modern *ghazal*, progressive *ghazal*, ritualistic poetry, and so on.

Abiz's generation experienced major social and political upheavals. As a child, he experienced the revolution which replaced a 2,500-year old monarchy system with the Islamic Republic, a then unique new form of government.

As a teenager, he was consumed with revolutionary and religious fervour and volunteered for the front line when he was 16. In the 1980s, Iran was an extremely gloomy place with huge pressure being placed on any political dissent. There were constant processions mourning victims of the war, and social freedoms were non-existent. The reforms of the 1990s offered a glimmer of hope for democracy and a lively intellectual atmosphere, but prosecution and censorship continued, leading to a new wave of migration, especially after the 2009 uprising. Many poets left Iran and chose a life in exile.

Although Abiz doesn't consider himself an exiled poet, he is nevertheless influenced by the group experience of exilic literature. His poetry touches on all his personal experiences of living, studying and working in these turbulent times and the major social upheavals in his home country.

His work has what feels to an English language reader like a unique but not entirely unfamiliar texture which you could classify as a dialled-down or even buttoned-up surrealism. Extraordinary, terrible things appear to be happening – his speakers move between life and death, and between victim and torturer or even murderer – but no-one, least of all the poet, seems to draw attention to the fact. The impact of his work depends on this extreme tension between the calm of its surface and the unfathomable uncertainty revealed to occupy its depths.

This is of course a response to living and writing under a repressive regime in which, as he has eloquently explored in his study, *Censorship of Literature in Post-Revolutionary Iran* (I.B.

Taurus / Bloomsbury, 2021), censorship and its consequences are so universal as to become deeply internalised, and where your censor might – almost – seem like your most insightful reader. This deeply unsafe space, where words or gestures can betray you with terrible consequences, and where almost no-one, not even yourself, can be entirely trusted, has had a radical effect on his poetry and the poetry of his generation.

'The book is illuminated by the, properly, tragic insight that, in a world constructed along lines of absolute right and wrong, while it can become tragically clear at any moment who is the perpetrator of oppression, the corrupting influence of dogmas is so insidious that no-one remains entirely innocent, or, if carried along by the paranoias of ideological purity, should be considered completely guilty. It is an insight of immediate relevance to the polarising factions of liberal democracy, which presume themselves capable of right and even righteous thinking, but who are therefore lulled by the seemingly permanence of their governing structures into imagining themselves immune from precisely this temptation toward unequivocality. Our humanity, it implies, lies in our doubt, and, most especially, in our self-doubt.'

There are parallels here with the Chinese poets of the Menglong or 'Misty' generation, where, during the 1980s, there was recourse to imagery and literary techniques which the censors would find obscure (or doubtful), but which their readers gave themselves permission to puzzle over and identify with. Then, post-Tiananman, there was a second phase in which these techniques were reapplied in various conditions of actual or internalised exile, where the audience more obviously included the rest of the world. So Abiz combines in this volume poems written from both inside and outside Iran. Like the work of those poets, and of other writers who have had to keep themselves at least one step smarter than their persecutors, layers of coded allusion both to an ominous present and a rich literary heritage acquire a type of allegorical significance in which symbols of freedom or oppression – doves, rabbits, ghouls, lemons, feasting, wine – acquire disquieting lives of their own.

Similarly, ordinary addresses accrue sinister import through repetition, and are discovered to be sites of torture and interrogation. The precise cut of a beard reveals the oxymoronic 'kindly interrogator' of the title poem, and, throughout the poems written in exile, there is a sense that Iran both as malign regime and as nostalgic homeland can never be truly left. The dichotomy between these aspects, it seems, remains unresolved, and must be carried with the poet, haunting everything he sees, hears, and writes.

The final sensation, paradoxically, is one of liberation through insight: the poems obsessively revisit traumatic scenes, but come to control their perspective. They find unexpected insight into the torments of the tormentors, subjecting them to imaginary reparations, and experience an all-encompassing compassion as well as discovering untouched moments of resistance and liberation: a soldier on the front line at dawn, the recollection of a verse by Eliot, the peace of a garden bench. It is a tribute to the intense, contained energies of Abiz's imagination that the reader too experiences both the strange complicities of living in oppression and the genuine redemption that this poetry strives for throughout.

The Kindly Interrogator

The Tired Soldier

From behind many hills
the wail of jackals wakens me
and the futile voices of the dawn.

Bugles cough like sick roosters
and the morning sun
bursts through the needles
of the garrison's pines.

The tired soldier
hangs his boots around his neck
and pisses in his helmet.

My ID Card

The agent asked me for an ID card
and none of my cards had a photo
so I had to talk to the woman passing outside in the street.
The woman fell down
and was transformed into a blade of grass.

Terrified, I returned.
The agent still had my card, photo-less, in his hand.
We went out into the street,
the woman was passing, her handbag over her shoulder.

I called out to her.
She turned and, in the form of a lifeless dove,
descended onto my ID card.

The Black Cat

For a long time now, this black cat
has been sitting outside on my veranda
with his eyes shining,
looking at me through the darkness.

It's been a long time since I was a sparrow,
since I was a dove,
even since I was a backyard hen.

But still this black cat
is sitting on the veranda outside my room
with his eyes shining,
looking at me through the darkness.

Detention

The heater was swallowing both our shivers
and the jug of gas oil,
and its smoke in the half-dark cellar
went up to help the spiders.

A middle-aged man was laughing joyously,
he had killed his neighbour.
An old man, fingers trembling,
put a cigarette between yellow teeth
while eyeing the teenage boy
who was singing in a sad voice.

A young man swept slowly
he had long fingers
and had been brought in drunk from the gutter.

I had only written on the wall
Safoora, my darling,
my red rose, I'd die for you.