
Pilgrimage

The Tongue of the Invisible

A single red, long-stemmed rose lies across the white marble of Hafiz's coffin. An old woman mouthing poems sits next to a turbaned cleric, surrounded by children on an outing, camera-toting tourists and young couples in love. The coffin of the poet lies in an open octagonal mausoleum set in a lovely flower garden in Shiraz, adjoined by a small teahouse, a library and a souvenir shop.

It is a place of pilgrimage in the true spirit of Hafiz's generous and compassionate message, a garden of joyous reverence. Hordes of schoolgirls get their picture taken, no-one minds the children running around and many linger in the teahouse. At night the tomb is illuminated, and pilgrims move around in shadow-play.

Hafiz is the most celebrated poet of Iran. He lived in the fourteenth century. 'Hafiz' means 'the one who remembers', and it is the name by which those who have memorized the entire Koran are known. Hafiz's given name was Shams-ud-din Muhammad; he studied in his youth, became a copyist, court poet, and college professor. Apart for a short and unhappy period of exile, he spent all of his life in Shiraz.

Much of what we know about Hafiz's life is apocryphal, and is best understood as a teaching story of spiritual development rather than an accurate biographical sketch. In his youth, Hafiz falls in love with a beautiful girl, but she is far above his station. Although his quest is hopeless, he writes love poems for her which become known all over Shiraz.

It was said that those who could stay awake for forty nights at the tomb of a saint could have any of their desires realised, and Hafiz resolves to do this. He endures the trial, and at dawn of his last night's vigil, the angel Gabriel appears to him. Hafiz has never seen anything this beautiful, forgets all about the girl, and answers to the question of the angel about his deepest wish that he wants to find God.

Hafiz's answer to the angel shows the metamorphosis from earthly to Divine love. The desire for the beautiful girl becomes a stepping stone to develop a greater, more encompassing and spiritual kind of love. Both loves have their own burning intensity. Love of the material, of so-called gross matter, can lead to love of the spiritual - to the love of subtle matter. At the moment of choice, Hafiz chooses God, chooses the spiritual over the material.

After this first taste of the Divine, Hafiz starts an apprenticeship with Attar. His master, Attar, is a strict and rigorous teacher, and Hafiz must endure many years of training and discipline. He is however getting no closer to enlightenment, and after many years, well into his sixties, begins to despair of ever reaching it.

Finally Hafiz is fed up, and decides that he will sit in a circle for another forty days and forty nights until he reaches enlightenment. At the end of this ordeal, the angel Gabriel appears to him again. This time Hafiz does not ask for enlightenment, but only to serve. By doing so, he obliterates the last shadow of the ego, lets go of his last attachment, and becomes enlightened. When he returns, he finds Attar already waiting for him, smiling. He spends the rest of his life in an enlightened state, composing poems¹.

Hafiz was in trouble in his own time for the irreverent tone of his poems and for suggesting that the seeker could attain the Divine, a key element of Sufi tradition but one at odds with official doctrine, to the point that the great mystic Hallaj had been martyred in the seventh century for publicly declaring to be Divine. Hafiz and others use many metaphors for Divine intoxication, such as Wine and the Tavern. Accounts suggest Hafiz did drink real wine, in contradiction of Islamic precepts, but its stronger and more important meaning is as a metaphor for the Divine intoxication felt by the seeker. It also allowed the community of Lovers to disguise their activities, since they were regarded as nothing more than a drunken rabble by those attached to outward religious form.

Burning for the Beloved

Some of Hafiz's poems are written from a searching state, and describe the longing for God and the path of the seeker, his search and the difficulties and disappointments on the path:

It is always a danger to aspirants on the path
 When they begin to believe and act
 As if the ten thousand idiots who so long ruled and lived inside
 Have all packed their bags and skipped town or died²

Others are written from the perspective of one who has attained enlightenment. Hafiz celebrates the boundless generosity of the Beloved. The seeker is the lover, who transmutes his earthly love into love for the Divine, for God, for the object of his longing, the Beloved.

This path to God made me such an old sweet beggar
 I was starving until one night my love tricked God himself to fall into my bowl
 Now Hafiz is infinitely rich, but all I ever want to do
 Is keep emptying out my emerald-filled pockets
 Upon this tear-stained world³.

The seeker is attracted to God like the moth to the flame, and like the moth, seeks to be annihilated in the flame of Divine Love. It is the ego which is annihilated, overcoming separation, and reuniting with Divine Reality. Another image is that of the drop which seeks to rejoin the ocean, which is annihilated by rejoining the ocean but in so doing rejoins universal consciousness, returns home and attains Divine Union.

Hafiz writes from this melting, from the annihilation of the ego, when all that remains is love. This is why he is called the 'Tongue of the Invisible'. From this enlightened viewpoint, every manifestation of life is holy. There is immense delight in all aspects of the world, and immense compassion with those struggling in the prison of their own ego, who are living amidst the splendour of the Divine world but do not see it:

With a wonderful God like that, why isn't everyone a screaming drunk?
 Hafiz's guess is this:
 Any thought that you are better or less than another man
 Quickly breaks the wine glass⁴.

Comparison, judging yourself and judging others, is one of the barriers to enlightenment, one way of living in misery. Many of Hafiz's poems are exhortations to make the effort, but always show his gentleness with the frailty and foibles of human beings, his compassion with their imprisonment in their misery, with their inability to see the Divine

world. The description and celebration of the enlightened state are the hallmarks of Hafiz's mature poetry.

Even for those reading Hafiz in English, without the splendour of the poems in Persian, through a double translation and interpretation, this message shines through. The 'interpretation' of the poems by a seeker on the path, such as Ladinsky, makes them more accessible, renders their force and impact and, at the same time, their humour and compassion. Ladinsky renders the spirit, not the letter, of the poems. He takes many liberties: shortening poems, using snippets, mixing parts of different poems together, using modern terminology and concepts that did not exist in Hafiz's time, even adding parts himself. This makes serious professors of literature the world over squirm, and has even led to the charge that some interpreters mainly use Hafiz's name to further their own writings. It is therefore a great pleasure to see that Hafiz's collected poems, his *Divan*, is sold at his tomb and throughout Iran in different language versions. The German and French versions follow different literal translations, which are more accurate but much less fiery. The English version, though, is a literal (and very likely 'illegal') reprint of the collection of Ladinsky renderings published as *The Gift*⁵.

Iranians use Hafiz's *Divan* as spiritual guidance. They ask the question they have in their lives at the moment, open the book at random, and take their guidance from the poem. A variation on this usage is presented by hawkers who sell illustrated poems of Hafiz. A tame bird perched on their shoulder chooses a poem at random by picking it with its beak out of a pile.

The Sufi stories are all about love. The heart is the vehicle; passion and desire are the paths to ecstasy and divine melting. The longing of the individual cut off from this divine reality is symbolised by the hollow reed and its plaintive song. This endless longing and desire is not seen as something negative that needs to be quashed, as in parts of the Christian tradition, or overcome, as in some of the Buddhist traditions, but as something to lose oneself in, and in this act of losing oneself overcome the bonds of ego and separation.

Hafiz celebrates the beauty of everything, including that which is normally considered unholy or common. Hafiz also gently ridicules the pious cleric who

concentrates on the form and not the content of the Divine. This insistence on the heart and not the outward form gives us reason to believe that Hafiz would not mind at all that his international, non-Persian speaking audience is introduced to his poetry through the inspired renditions of Ladinsky. It also raises interesting questions as to how Hafiz's irreverence is seen by the current ecclesiastical authorities in Iran.

Religion and power

Indeed, fourteenth century Persia no longer lies outside the sheltered gardens of Hafiz's tomb, but the Islamic Republic of Iran in the year 2005. Taxis vie with buses and trucks for asphalt in a colourful cacophony along the broad avenues, while impassive shop-owners sit behind mountains of spices, electronics and cloth. In the shade of the tea houses men chat and smoke their waterpipes, and the black-clad tent shapes of women disappear into doorways. The bright sun shines down on a mixture of frenetic energy, measured movements, and smiles.

There is always something strange in the air, though, something missing from the picture. Everyday reality seems orchestrated, controlled, uniform. In great contrast to the freewheeling irreverence found in Hafiz's poetry, the religious authorities in contemporary Iran place great importance on adherence to the rule of the law and to outward appearance. Their focus is on the literal interpretation of religious edicts. This outward form of piety is strictly enforced in the dress code, in the requirement for women to cover their bodies from head to toe, with the exception of their faces and hands. It is seen in the regulation governing how to behave in public, forbidding unrelated men and women to touch. There is constant awareness of the all-pervasive surveillance by religious police. This control is all the more stifling because it is undercover, not out in show and force.

Everywhere one looks the rules of religious law are apparent. Contemporary Iran has welded political power and social organisation to religion. Nowhere is this more visible than in the tomb being built for Ayatollah Khomeini, the architect of the Islamic Republic, an immense mausoleum at the edge of the general cemetery in Tehran, some way out of the city. The mausoleum, still under construction, lies amidst large empty and

dusty stretches of building sites. Monumental walls stretch for several hundred metres to each side, encircling an enormous courtyard filled with bulldozers and cranes.

Large families are picnicking on the concrete outside the grand entrance, through which men and women enter separately, having left shoes, cameras and bags outside. Khomeini's sarcophagus is set in a large glass room, bathed in green light. The floor of the room lies thick with bills and coins which visitors press through slots. Reverence here is subdued, silent, reinforced by the awe of crushing size. The sound of every single movement reverberates, amplified, through the cavernous hall. A group of uniformed schoolgirls with drawn faces is lined up to sing a martial hymn.

Inner and outer worlds

The tombs of the poet and the political leader, straddling six centuries, stand as two poles of the presence of religion in the world. The spiritual and worldly, united in the person of the Prophet Mohammed who was both a spiritual and worldly leader, have since followed divergent paths. The poet represents the inner form of religion, sings of the burning for Union with God, while the political leader fashions a society in which the edicts of the Holy Book are respected to the letter, in which the homosexual is hanged, the adulteress stoned and the blasphemous must die. How does this inner form of generosity and forgiveness relate to the outer form of strict adherence to the law under pain of punishment?

Clergymen and mystics alike usually claim that the literal understanding of religious law is for the common man, whereas inner spirituality presupposes a certain level of culture and training. Khomeini himself was a fervent admirer of Hafiz the poet, even composing poems which sing of the metaphorical tavern. Spiritual groups seek to protect their teaching by limiting it to a select membership and by disguising the message in many layers of metaphor. In this they often distance themselves from the plain understanding of the common man and his insistence on clear universal guidelines and interpretation. There is the outward physical Kabah in Mecca which the pilgrim must circle, and there is the Kabah of the heart held by the spiritual seeker, which is

everywhere at once⁶. There is the minor *jihad*, the fight with arms in the outside world, and the major *jihad*, the fight taking place in the inner field of the individual⁷.

Esoteric schools treasure their role as a minority separate from the vast crowds under the sway of ideology and strict laws, even to the point of risking persecution. The political leaders for their part have appropriated the daily practice of religion and the truth of the sacred texts as elements of political control and lawmaking, and have both tolerated the mystics for their wisdom and persecuted them when their influence threatened the official truth.

The idea that the spiritual message is only for the elect is belied by the enormous popularity of Hafiz's poems. He finds a way of speaking directly to people's hearts, of communicating complex messages on several levels. His poems are, on one level, simple love poems, and can be understood as such, yet a deeper yearning for spiritual belonging underlies them. It is said that each household must possess at least two books: The Koran and Hafiz's *Divan*. Heretical rumours even circulate that if there is only place for one, it should be the Hafiz.

Through Hafiz and Rumi, the esoteric texts of the Sufis with their many-layered metaphors and veiled references to truths too dangerous to pronounce publicly, have entered wholesale into the New Age understanding in the West. Through several centuries and layers of translation and interpretation, the poet has spoken to the hearts of the pilgrims that come to pay tribute to the marble grave of the 'Tongue of the Invisible', to recite his yearning for divine love, to bathe in the generosity and compassion of his God, and to find solace and guidance. The poet is one of the least powerful people in terms of political and financial power, always at the mercy of patronage and protection. But the poet's power lies in his access to human hearts, as Attar had predicted of his impatient pupil Hafiz:

I can so clearly see that God has made love with you
And the whole universe is germinating inside your belly
And wonderful words, such enlightening words will take birth from you
And be cradled against thousands of hearts⁸.

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Notes

¹ These stories are recounted by Henry S. Mindlin in his introduction “The life and work of Hafiz”.

² Hafiz, *The Subject Tonight is Love*, p.51.

³ Hafiz, *The Subject Tonight is Love*, p. 27.

⁴ Hafiz, *The Gift*, p. 205.

⁵ In my opinion, it is better to go from the Ladinsky interpretations towards the more literal and scholarly renderings, rather than the other way around. Once the reader has been opened to the splendour and strengths of the poems, then this shines through in the more literal translations. If you start with the literal translations, they may seem quite distant and artificial. There is a bigger hermeneutic step to be made. On this point, see Carl Ernst, *Sufism*, p. 171-173.

⁶ Henri Corbin, *L’Imam caché*, p.

⁷ Henri Corbin, *L’Imam caché*, p. 254-255.

⁸ Hafiz, *The Gift*, p. 93.