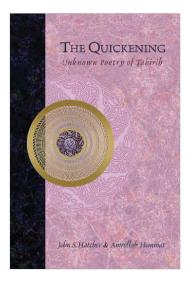
## **Book Review**



Review of *The Quickening: Unknown Poetry* of *Táhirih*, by John S. Hatcher and Amrollah Hemmat. 261 pages. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2011.

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We can never be too humble as artists to copy the fever and craft of the other artist in alien tongue but, at best, any rendition of Persian poetry into English is only luminescent and can never trap the incandescent glow of the original work, just a bright mirror of an ancient glory. The "other" artist in this case is Jináb-i-Táhirih (Her Excellence, the Pure One), a legend and sworn poetess of every dauntless dawnbreaker. This "first woman suffrage martyr" (Shoghi Effendi 75),

"the beautiful and enthusiastic Kurratu'l-'Ayn" (Browne 287–88)<sup>2</sup> was a gifted, impetuous founder of a new cadence and the embodiment of religious resurgence in mid-nineteenth-century Iran.

In her writings and poems, Táhirih may well be the faithful representation of a Bahá'í Weltanschauung (world view), "one of the most affecting episodes in modem history" (Lord Curzon, qtd. in Maneck 7) and herself a worthy symbol of "the greatest religious movement of the century" (Browne 424). She was a Persian Joan of Arc.3 a charismatic, undeterred. and unruffled woman leader, "almost the prophetess" (Browne 240) whom none can mention without a certain involuntary awe and admiration, and to whom these tardy words still ring true: "Then courage . . . revoltress! / For till all ceases neither must you cease" (Whitman 288).

<sup>1 &</sup>quot;Dawnbreaker" is a term alluding to the early followers of the Báb, the Prophet and Herald of Bahá'u'lláh.

<sup>2</sup> There is no one uniform code to the spelling of Qurratu'l-'Ayn or Qurrat-i-'Ayní—a title given by her admiring teacher Siyyid Kázim and translated diversely as "Freshness" or "Delight of the Eyes" or "Solace of my Eyes," the latter description being the more current and universally accepted as formalized by Shoghi Effendi in his book *God Passes By*, first published in 1944.

<sup>3</sup> An apt description for Táhirih's emancipatory leadership given by French idealist, scholar, and mystic, H.A. Jules Bois, in his short article "Babism and Bahaism," printed in 1925 and quoted in Shoghi Effendi's *God Passes By*.

By all this is meant that Táhirih's corpus of poetry is no ordinary work to read, let alone for translators to pause and prescribe treatment. It is not enough to plough to discover what the verses proclaim through semantics and syntax; through our habitual knowledge of language; through grammars, dictionaries, and all the literature that is the source of dictionaries; through the use of classical tools of time-honored traditions, such as the devices esteqbál and tazmin, for example, used liberally by Táhirih and methodically explained by Hatcher and Hemmat in their footnotes to the poems—through all that makes a language and a culture.

Translating Táhirih's concentrated, imaginative awareness of experience in a distant culture undergoing profound religious upheaval in poetry derived not from the past but from the future, of texts of a distinct genre in which content exceeds the phrase is a truly formidable task. To convey the rapture of these poems to an English-speaking audience, the translator must not only capture Táhirih's spectacularly autonomous, daring, and creative imagination, but also preserve her poetic energy and guarantee her poetic authenticity in the form she wished. For me, that form focuses on helping revolutionary modernity to know itself, to arrive at itself, to make and to manifest itself: "...For you there should be detachment / that you might discern the (one) hidden Countenance now dawned in the world" (Hatcher and Hemmat 54).

Doing away with the veil of the past and ushering in the garb of the future, Táhirih seeks to produce the arrival of a "modern revolution" through an act of self-foundation and self-creation: we, standing here and now, must act!

It is particularly apt that in the subtitle chosen by the authors, "unknown poetry" is precisely referring to that part of our poetic faculty yet to be born as a mode of access to this modern collective consciousness that the poet laureate Táhirih typifies but that we have yet to experience on a global scale; namely, to carry into the vernacular that an ever-advancing civilization depends on seeking the new and discarding the old. This process inevitably and forcibly entails the willingness to sacrifice (the hallmark of the revolutionary rather than the reformer) and should be an integral part of any outlook on progress: "He should know that my Cause is greater than all other causes and / will appear in creation only through great tests and trials" (43).

Sorrow or lamentation never prevails in Táhirih's work. "O Tá, cry out once again and proclaim / the mystery of mysteries is disclosed with Joy!" (48). But neither does it go away. "O God, through Your utmost generosity, cast but one glance / so that I might emerge from the acrid regions of fire" (118). Counterbalancing between them there is acquiescence, a state that contains both tension and absolute stillness. The tension is the suffering of separation. The stillness is peace in the reunion.

In Táhirih's poetry there is little peace, and where there is, it is passing, restless, and always inadequate—always pointing us toward a knowledge, not just of self that "passeth understanding," but given her important defiant figure at the outset of the Bábí Faith, of a post-Islamic self-understanding, as well.

Observe how...the once Hidden Cloud of God is now being unveiled.

. . . .

O you who would be attentive to this new call, note how the breast of the one from Tá is in flames in His longing for the Face of His friend who brings the Truth; because of separation from that Face, His tears pour forth. (180–81)

These verses show the struggle with the specific temporality of modernity as defined by Táhirih, namely the spiritual reformation of human society long promised—a temporality of breaks and new beginnings that continues to be confronted with a past that can never be abandoned for good, nor should it be. This temporality, in all its tensions and contradictions, appears nowhere as succinctly and strikingly as in this peculiar genre of crafted utterance modeled on the "song, meditation, prayer, exordium, ecstatic outpouring—in formal verses" (Banani, Kessler, and Lee 36).

Táhirih's poems centrally are shaped by the insistence of versification alongside revolution; an intimate, contentious, alliance—the twin muses-from which neither could entirely escape. "And through His revolution in His celestial habitation. / the heavens of creation are illumined by the light of glory from the Exalted One" (Hatcher and Hemmat 123). And it is because of this style of writing that any subsequent study of the history of the genre must also entail a history of reformation. This fact easily explains why the heroic life and exquisite verse of Táhirih have such a central place in the history and literature of the Bahá'í Faith

Professors John Hatcher and Amrollah Hemmat in their book The Quickening have admirably incorporated this dual task in their material. Not only do they identify the historical formation and poetry of Táhirih in their lengthy introduction, but they have also translated forty-two of her poems into English. Anyone who seeks conjunction and homogeneity in the operation of a poet's mind will be compelled to read this book; anyone drawn to language simple and pure will have difficulty in finding other works emulating it; and anyone who prizes simplicity in structure as the poet's mark of fidelity to thought and feeling and not the stroke of literary incapacity will be encouraged by it.

Given that perfection in translation is inconceivable and perfect mimesis is impossible, the best way to approach this task would be to have Persian scholars of English literature translate Persian works into English. In the pair Hatcher and Hemmat, we have, however, a match that betters this formula by reinforcing both sides—Persian and English scholarship. The authors are neither literalist informants (more appropriate to journalism) nor, thankfully, taxidermists determined to be masters of stuffing. They make a valuable contribution in easing tension between different language forms and meanings while showcasing the corpus of Táhirih's work.

This project had its beginning with Hatcher and Hemmat's The Poetry of Táhirih (George Ronald, 2002), by the pair's joint collaboration in the sequel Adam's Wish: Unknown Poetry of Táhirih (Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2008), followed in 2011 by the subject of this review. Altogether nine years of translator artists' craftsmanship to recognize, re-create, and reveal the work of a woman poet breaking ancestral silence and whom, one might imagine, they seem to have met and conversed with, rather than merely having encountered through read about her history.

Acknowledging the distances inherent in poetry translation (all "translation dwells in exile. It cannot return" [Barnstone 265].) still does not bring us any closer to its measurement, but here is where the simultaneous observation from two faculty members from American universities representing separate cultural viewpoints allows the voyage on the sea of license to seem shorter, less turbulent,

and this because of a single, common vision: both John Hatcher and Amrollah Hemmat are Bahá'ís.

The vantage point afforded by their religious faith is instrumental in determining how close the translation is to representing Táhirih's world, and they are borne by the same spirit that moved Browne to confess in the early 1890s "that a religion which has produced examples of such heroic courage and fortitude . . . merits a careful examination, since that must needs contain noble thoughts which can prompt to noble deeds" (27).

Though I am not particularly competent to pass critical judgment on the translation work itself, and I am even less well-versed in *ars poetica*, I feel it fitting and necessary to comment on the organization of the book and make a suggestion for future editions (to best combine the *dulce* with the *utile*). The extensive footnotes that accompany each poem act as a barrier and hinder the reader to drift in the direction he or she chooses.

Stated more specifically, I do not feel it to the primary purpose of poems to convey information. There are 348 annotations to the forty-two poems, which may not seem excessive until one recognizes that these poems contain "verses of varied style and length from brief two-or three-line pieces, to more formal and lengthy elucidations" (Hatcher and Hemmat 3). I would suggest, therefore, that these footnotes could more usefully and artfully be separated to form a later section in the book to which the

reader may refer. As each of the poems have been provided titles (not given by Táhirih, as classical Persian poems are never given titles but simply stand on their own), such a division of an additional notes section in the book would not be difficult or disruptive.

What compounds this form of arrangement and its excesses is the frequent reference to the author's intent in composing a particular poem in a particular way, for example, "Possibly Táhirih is here telling . . ." (Hatcher and Hemmat 45 n. 33), "This line seems to say . . ." (61 n. 24), "Táhirih is here expressing the need to raise the question of . . ." (62 n. 31), "Táhirih is pointing out that . . ." (125 n. 17), and still others of this nature.

Footnotes serve a purpose in clarifying oriental terms, significant names and places, epic stories, and, as mentioned earlier, the practice of writing a new poem patterned on the form and structure of a more famous earlier poem written by someone else (esteqbál) or, for example, in explaining when a line has been borrowed from an earlier poem and is being incorporated into a new poem (tazmin).

All this contributes significantly to knowledge, and the authors' exhaustive and invaluable research offers an extremely useful glossary for the reader. The concern is that at the heart of the problem of excessive annotation (especially on the same page) is the repetitive questioning of authorial intention and its importance or even relevance to the reading and interpretation of a work of poetry.

To read a poem is to read a poem. We may neither have the desire nor the ability to discern the author's intentions. We care about what the author wrote, not what the author thought she was writing. (Is not every writer as much the tool of language as its wielder?). As the coiners of the phrase "the intentional fallacy" stated, "The evaluation of the work of art remains public; the work is measured against something outside the author" (Wimsatt and Beardsley 10).

In conclusion, we need not be historians to enjoy Táhirih's poetry, nor are we to use it to make timely articulations on our postmodern angst, although such options as examining literature from perspectives external to the text are always to be recommended. No doubt there shall be future attempts at reformulating Táhirih's summons, but our two extraordinary erudite and literary talents have shown that her religion of love knows no boundaries, be they language or culture, and their book goes far in showing us that to live and love at all we must live imaginatively.

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