

Tiptoeing past Armenian-Iranian-American Demons **A Review of Leonardo Alishan's *Dancing Barefoot on Broken Glass***

Writing about the writing of an acquaintance is dicey business, especially if the acquaintance is Iranian and the writing is poetry. Poetry is serious business for Iranians who write it, even if they otherwise function as restaurateurs, petroleum engineers, housewives, or university professors. Whatever secular-minded Iranians do in and with their lives, once they pen at least a couple of poems, their culture invites them onto a very special pedestal.

The story of the poet Mehdi Akhavân-e Sâles (d. 1990) and the butcher's wife is famous in Iranian literary circles. As one version has it, the butcher in question looked the other way when his wife consorted with Akhavân because after all the latter was a great poet. But then the butcher showed Akhavân some of his own "poems." Akhavân reportedly told his paramour's spouse that he should stick to mutton and cleavers. The butcher, the story goes, had Akhavân promptly thrown in jail for moral turpitude.

Actually writing about the poetry of an Iranian acquaintance is dicey also for another reason: one already knows much about the poet behind the poems which, owing to cultural constraints, one can't even dream about writing down as commentary. In years past, I only once couldn't resist the urge to write about an Iranian acquaintance. That was a biographical sketch called "Nâder Nâderpour and Thirty Years of Persian Poetry" (1986). Truth be told, incipient friendship did not survive publication of that essay, despite care taken in preparing it. To separate what I knew from days and evenings with the poet in Paris from what a biographer might legitimately write, I asked him one day during a visit of his to Austin if he would answer specific questions about his life, those answers to constitute my essay's exclusive raw material, together with allusions in his poems and published interviews. He agreed. And although I wrote the article based on that interview, the article still crossed a cultural line which my American eyes did not discern. One of the poet's friends later wrote me that I should have written nothing in the essay except for the poet's date of birth and dates of publication of his collections of poetry. Another friend said that a real friend would know what not to write about the poet even if the poet offered information in response to questions.

Now, at least Mr. Naderpour's poetic speakers have properly opaque and perhaps multiple Iranian masks. But when an Iranian acquaintance's writing is wholeheartedly modernist lyric poetry with a speaker indistinguishable from the poet's voice outside of the poetry and with specific details from the life of the poet outside of his or her poetry, the business of writing about it becomes even dicier. This is especially true if one wants to write about very human revelations in that poetry, while appreciating the conviction on the part of many Iranians that lyric poets are the noblest manifestation of homo sapiens and that lyric poetry is the most honorable and wise and inspiring of all possible human expression.

A further and even emotional issue in Iranian culture has to do with what anyone means by poem, poetry, and poet to begin with, when embarking upon a critical appreciation of Persian lyric poems. Years ago, a review article of mine called "Manuchehri: Poet or Versifier?" (1976) suggested that the Ghaznavid court worthy was more of the latter than the former. I'd say the same about the traditionalist poet Parvin E'tesâmi (d. 1941) if asked. People still remonstrate with me for such an insult to Manuchehri (d.c. 1040/1) and traditional Persian poetry. The same people naturally dismiss Nimâ Yushij's (d. 1960) view that Iran has always been chock full of nâzems [versifiers], but short on shâ'ers [poets].

For me the word "poem" denotes the special and skillful use of language which creates in readers effects called "poetic" (of course circular definitions don't define). I grew up on Laurence Perrine's *Sound and Sense* and later bought into Elder Olson's notions about lyric poetry. That special use of language which strikes me as leading to poetic effects usually involves as much sound as sense, and often includes metered speech, but not necessarily. In a given composition which strikes me as poetic, some other feature might achieve the effects often associated with meter. The English poet and Persianist scholar Dick Davis says we should use the term "poem" only for verse compositions. But some compositions in metered speech communicate ineffectively or do not offer all of the pleasure I associate with and expect from poetic art. So I distinguish between "poetry" and "verse" and am prepared for the possibility that, for

example, a given technical ghazal composition not qualify as poetry, while ready to discern poetry in parts of a given novel. In line with this view, Dick Davis, for example, is a good poet sometimes and a good versifier all of the time. These casual observations on poetry appear here, not as an argument for my view of poetry, but merely as a caveat to readers that my impressions of specific "poems" derive from such a view.

As for Leonardo Alishan's *Dancing Barefoot on Broken Glass* (New York: Ashod Press, 1991, [xvi], 77 p.) traditionalist Iranian critics and readers would call it non-poetry by definition. But, for me it is the work of a poet, a poet at that Whitmanesque end of the poetry spectrum where verse has less significance than intensity of meaning and image, and "poetic" tone and fervor in communicating poetic effects to readers. When his poems exhibit verse patterns, it is an ancillary phenomenon. For example, with my slight editing, these three regular verses in iambic tetrameter reveal themselves in a passage of "Monologues of the Hollow Vale" among other lines from eight to seventeen syllables in length otherwise not amenable to scansion: ". . . no ságe can máke the déad king ríse. / No kíng can máke a wár look wíse. / No wísdóm léad[s] . . . to páradíse" (p. 57).

What make Alishan's work poetry are his poet's eye, his poet's succinctness, and his poetic sense of the urgent, mysterious magnitude of the human plight. Alishan uses his poet's eye with skill to produce suggestive word pictures with implied points the way Basho did. Alishan's short poem called "Descent" reads: "Two brown butterflies / chasing each other on the snow— / two dead leaves / caught in a cold wind" (p. 46). Alishan is also capable of the poetic one-liner, the way a single *mesrâ'* or *bayt* in a Hâfezian ghazal can stand on its own as poetic statement. In "Monologues of the Hollow Tale" appears this one-line poem: "Bach is in the hands of an organist worried for his job" (p. 58). In "Notes on Time," the speaker observes: "Thought is a glutton / ravaging the table of time" (p. 16). Alishan has the further ability to see issues of his human condition in phenomena of nature, presented concretely to communicate the abstract state. His poem "Wraecca" reads in part: "Like ducklings / my children follow me / around the duck pond. / I envy the mother duck / her confidence . . ." (p. 46).

I wouldn't know Leonardo Alishan personally were he not Iranian and had he not decided to study Persian literature in the States in the mid-1970s. Consequently, I approached *Dancing Barefoot on Broken Glass* expecting to enter a mostly Iranian poetic world. The back cover of the book describes Alishan as "an Armenian-Iranian-American poet." But, after reading the seventy-nine compositions filling the seventy-seven pages in the book, my first impression was of a trip to an unfamiliar world, which, if Iranian, is very particular and not mainstream, the world of an Armenian born in Iran who has settled in the States. That the poet evidences no special love for the Persian language vis-à-vis Armenian or English puts him immediately into a special category of Iranian poets. Then there are European classical mythological images, the Christian backdrop, and the domestic American setting of the poems.

The lyric speaker of many poems in *Dancing Barefoot on Broken Glass* is at home in an awe-struck, American way in ancient Greek history and mythology. Aristotle, the Sirens, Penelope, Andromache, Odysseus, Daphne, Cyclops, Apollo, mermaids, and other such figures people this speaker's mind and imagination. Alishan's "The Second Song" combines already cited skills with a deft allusion to this ancient world: "A man lived alone / with his broken mirror for so long, / he believed in the crack in his face. / You are the clean and radiant mirror / of the beginning; you are / the restoration of man's face. / In your presence / Diogenes blew out / the light of his lamp / and discovered his dirty feet" (pp. 7-8).

A second source of inspiration and imagery for the speaker of *Dancing Barefoot* is Christianity. He talks about church-bells, Sunday mornings, Mary Magdalene, and crucifixes. When he depicts the ups and downs, the highs and lows of his own life, he chooses "Lazarus" for the former and "Job Breaks" for the latter. The speaker recalls himself as "the happy child who served you [Lord] as an altar boy, the child you loved to catch on every fall" (p. 48). As a grownup, the narrator prays: "Lord, for old times' sake, please catch me as I fall (p. 49), the while aware that "on a pilgrimage" one can almost see "the trademark of 'Joseph and Son' on a corner of the cross" (p. 39).

Such Christian images really speak to the Armenianness of the poet's voice and signal a texture of heartfelt Armenian imagery of Ararat, St. Eghishi, Lake Van, the Black Sea, Arax, Yerevan, Van, Sevan, Armen, Mother Armenia, and, most important of all the reader supposes, his Armenian grandmother: "Granny . . . when she first heard

her hair was fair / she was fourteen, her cheeks were red / her scarf was loose, her skin was white, / and the Turk did not mean it as a compliment" (p. 68).

"Granny" appears in a score of poems. The speaker can't let her go even years after her death. In "Losers," he recalls occasions in childhood when Granny played a role. One of them evokes this poem: "At my birthday parties / we played musical chairs. / Whoever was left standing / got a big hug from Granny. / She knew all too well how it felt / to be the last one, left alone, standing" (p. 68).

The reader suspects that Granny suffered something horrible at the hands of Turks in the infamous pogrom in the early years of the twentieth century. Readers never learn if she survived that horror while those around her did not or if part of her did not survive. But they do learn that "Granny lost what little appetite she had twelve years ago when she died" and that "Granny went mad and died." "Granny" finally abandoned the speaker who would sometimes like as much as anything else to remain near her in the prepubescent green world of boyhood. He says "Sweeping the shattered chandelier / of . . . childhood dreams / is a job never done. / Days, . . . , months, [years] later / you still find another piece" (p. 6).

Why for the speaker gleaming crystal childhood dreams necessarily fall to the ground and shatter may intimate what some Iranians think of as their culture-specific pessimism. But the speaker virtually ignores poetical or geographical Iranian imagery deriving from or evocative of a real Iran which an Iranian of his generation who calls Esfahân his home might have experienced. To be sure, the speaker invokes Anahit, Yazdgerd III, Ctesiphon, Persepolis (who were the speaker's "ragged wailing women of Persepolis," that Achaemenid religious shrine whose art implies the absence of women there?), Darius, Avicenna, and Alexander. But Alishan almost never reflects the sights and sounds of medieval Persian poetry, Safavid Armenian Iran, or even modernist Iranian Persian poetry. Here follow possible exceptions. In "Notes on Time," when the speaker says "The bartender / has already called / for last drinks, / they're turning off the lights" (p. 16), a momentary flicker of atmosphere from Akhavân's "Winter" can cross the mind. In "Twins I," the speaker's assertion that "mongols did not do / to a fallen city / what I did / to my life" (p. 10) may echo Shâmlu in "Âydâ in the Mirror." And the reader may recall Farrokhzâd's "Wind-up Doll" when reading "Alternatives," which begins: "One can find faith: / a green speck, flying / with the touch of a fingertip" (p. 34). Iran's revolution in 1978 and 1979 does not impinge upon the speaker's consciousness either, while the Iran-Iraq war from 1980 to 1988 is there only indirectly as the presumed cause for the destruction of his family's home in Esfahân. That only seven or eight poems among seventy-nine depict any aspects of romantic love likewise bespeaks a not typical Iranian lyric orientation.

When all is said and done, the most pervasive cluster of images is domestic and personal, offered piece-meal to readers. Besides "Granny," readers meet the speaker's children who play, his daughter Eileen and his son Ari, a twin sister who died at birth or in infancy or childhood, and his mother and father. They meet "Neli" preparing dinner (for the family) and praying (for him). The reader can guess that "Neli" is the "you" in the handful of love poems; but the speaker therein exhibits what may seem a sort of Iranian circumspectness here in not naming or fleshing out a beloved of unspecified gender and no physical characteristics (for example, in "The Second Song," above).

All of his family members support the speaker and offer him moments of happiness and some solace. The solace is always there, but may not always suffice. The happiness is occasional, when the speaker is (unrealistically?) up-beat, as in "Lazarus," where he, Iranian poet that he is, thinks happy days are when "my worst poems / look good" (p. 28). But the speaker has a great battle on his hands, which he likewise introduces indirectly and piece-meal. He tells readers that "A demon rules a kingdom of demons in me" and that "the demon . . . dwells in the right side of my brain." He talks about "Pills to sleep. Pills / to tolerate the day. / Alcohol to forget the pills, the bills . . ." (p. 57) and "payments and promises," "installments," and "impatient cigarettes."

Here is Alishan's "Christmas Eve, 1988":

Angels sleep on a stack of gambling debts
gathering dust and interest.

The ivy loses five leaves every day.

I helplessly count

the last sleeping pills
 on my unfamiliar fingers.
 The Christmas tree is a village maid
 all made up for her wedding night.
 The fireplace is a big, black yawn.
 Yellow leaves should not be left
 among the green.
 (Why does Granny's ghost
 sleep under my son's bed?) . . .
 The big win, the sure bet
 never was and never came.
 I kissed the bottle goodbye
 but the apricots never kissed me back.
 A cigarette butt burns my nostrils
 but I am too tired
 to put it out.
 My guardian angels sleep
 with their broken wings
 on my soft stack of gambling debts.
 In the mirror I see
 God's corpse burning in the acid seas.
 The tired ivy hangs her bare arms languidly.
 (I'm too tired to bend,
 raise the blankets from my son's bed,
 and play peek-a-boo
 with Granny's ugly ghost.) . . .
 It [is] . . . frustrating
 . . . counting sleeping pills
 and having extra fingers left.
 In the end, the old fireplace
 will have the ultimate pleasure
 of belching smoke
 after making a meal of the Christmas tree.
 (Merry Christmas Granny and good night.) (pp. 22-23)

If, as my American/Persianist impression would have it, the speaker of *Dancing Barefoot on Broken Glass* is Armenian more than anything else, it would follow that his Armenian heritage is the "broken glass." His Armenian "poetic" temperament would consequently be the impulse and need to dance. "Barefoot" is the speaker's vulnerable state. My American advice to this Armenian speaker is that he pick up the pieces of glass gingerly and lovingly and reassemble them as best he can, the way Iranians, ever since the days of Alexander the Great, have often done so artfully with their shattered past. Then the speaker should resume dancing, dance his legs off even if some shards remain underfoot. But Alishan's speaker should start wear dancing shoes or boots. Even Armenian dancers in Armenia reportedly never go barefoot.

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